

Is There A Better Road Ahead for California-Mexico Relations?

By Pablo Rodriguez



“No other bilateral relationship is more important to the security and the prosperity of the United States than its relationship with Mexico, in the same way that the well being of the Mexican people is inextricably tied to the fate of the United States. We must ensure that on both sides of the border our citizens remain co-stakeholders to this all-important bilateral relationship.” - **Arturo Sarukhán**, Ambassador of Mexico to the United States

The April 26th visit to Sacramento by Arturo Sarukhán, Mexico’s Ambassador to the U.S., provides an opportunity for the new Brown administration, and the California Legislature to make a healthy bilateral relationship with Mexico a real priority for California. Ambassador Sarukhán is the key policymaker of Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s Administration for trade, immigration, and combating transnational organized crime.

Who is Sarukhán?

Ambassador Sarukhán has developed a distinguished and powerful diplomatic career dating back to 1993 when he was Chief of Staff to the Ambassador of Mexico to the United States later becoming the head of the counternarcotics office at the Embassy. In 2000 he became Chief of Policy Planning at the Foreign Ministry and was appointed by President Vicente Fox as Mexican Consul General to New York City in 2003. He resigned from this post and took a leave of absence from the Foreign Service in 2006 to join the Presidential Campaign of Felipe Calderón as Foreign Policy Advisor and International Spokesperson and then became Coordinator for Foreign Affairs in the Transition Team.

Prior to presiding over the evening grand opening ceremony and reception of the of the new Consulate General of Mexico in Sacramento; Ambassador Sarukhán is scheduled to meet with Assembly Speaker John Perez as well as address the Sacramento Chapter of the World Affairs Council. The World Affairs Council event entitled: *Challenges and opportunities of the U.S. Mexico relationship* will discuss the U.S./Mexico relationship and the challenges and implications of increased social and economic pressures¹.

Recent California-Mexico Trade Facts and Official History

California and Mexico share a deep, rich history dating well before the one-hundred forty five mile long international border was established in 1848. Simple economics demonstrates the financial benefits of an improved California-Mexico relationship. Mexico continues to be California's number one export market. In 2011, trade with Mexico represents over 250,000 California jobs sending \$21 billion dollars in California produced goods to Mexico.

In 2004, a list of California-Mexico programs from over 100 state agencies was issued entitled: *“Inventory of Mexico Related Projects Conducted by California State Agencies”*². The report showed that no responsible state entity existed to coordinate California-Mexico interagency cooperation. Thus, AB 3021 (Núñez) was created to fill the need for statewide oversight and coordination of multi-agency involvement with Mexico. AB 3021 created an independent council, the *California-Mexico Border Relations Council* (CMBRC).

The appointed members of the Council became the Secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency; the Secretary of the Resources Agency; the Secretary of the Health and Human Services Agency; the Secretary of

¹ [Challenges and Opportunities of the US-Mexico Relationship](#) | World Affairs Council of Northern California | April 2011

² [Inventory of Mexico Related Projects Conducted by California State Agencies](#) | California Research Bureau | November 2004

the Business Transportation and Housing Agency; the Secretary of the Department of Food and Agriculture; the Secretary of the California Emergency Management Agency. The role of the CMBRC³ has been to:

1. Coordinate cross-border programs, initiatives, projects and partnerships within California state agencies.
2. Establish California state agency policies for the collection and sharing of cross-border data.
3. Identify and recommend changes in the law needed to achieve the goals of the Council.
4. Provide an annual Council activities report to the Legislature.

As of February 16, 2010 Council project updates for 2009-2010 included progress reports on environmental and waste cleanup projects, as well as over \$12.4 million dollars in California-Mexico border infrastructure projects⁴. **Totally lacking were any projects or proposals that furthered a substantive California-Mexico economic relationship.**

A New Hope

This year, Assemblymember Victor Manuel Perez, Chairman of the Assembly Committee on Jobs, Economic Development, and the Economy is addressing the weak record of the Schwarzenegger Administration in terms of California-Mexico trade relations. He has introduced AB 1410 which would:

(1) Establish the Office of California-Mexico Affairs for the purpose of further developing favorable economic, educational, and cultural relations with bordering Mexican states and United States Border States.

(2) Place operations of the California-Mexico Border Relations Council within the California Office of the Southwest Border Regional Conference⁵.

Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. and the California Legislature can now start over by passing and enacting AB 1410. However, a truly healthy California-Mexico relationship involves far more than just passing a bill or creating another state agency. We must utilize the visit of Ambassador Arturo Sarukhán as a catalyst to develop a multi-year strategic action plan to best utilize the existing California-Mexico Border Relations Council, and the transition to a new Office of California-Mexico Affairs. A strategic action plan would identify the best commercial, academic and entrepreneurial opportunities. California cannot sit idly and expect this to happen by itself. Other states like Texas will pick up the slack if California does nothing. Progressives should show their support for AB 1410 and the leadership of Assemblymember Victor Manuel Perez on this vitally important economic issue.

³ [California-Mexico Border Relations Council](#) | California Environmental Protection Agency | 2011

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [AB 1410](#) | April 12, 2011