

Testimony to the House Judiciary Committee and the Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement

Topic: The Biden Border Crisis: North Dakota Perspectives

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Introduction

Chairperson and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Rebecca Davis, and I represent the Walhalla Area Chamber of Commerce, as well as the cities of Walhalla, Neche, and Cavalier in North Dakota. I am here to discuss the significant impacts of the current border crossing hours at our local ports of entry and to advocate for the restoration of their former operating hours.

Current Situation

The ports of entry in Walhalla and Neche currently operate on reduced hours. The Walhalla port is open from 8 AM to 6 PM, while the Neche port operates from 8 AM to 4 PM. In stark contrast, the hours to enter Canada at these same crossings extend until 10 PM, which causes considerable confusion for travelers and disrupts the daily lives and economic activities of our communities. Prior to COVID-19, both Walhalla and Neche ports were open until 10 PM, facilitating smoother cross-border interactions.

The only 24-hour border crossing in the region is located in Pembina, which is 39 miles from Walhalla and 19 miles from Neche. This situation presents a substantial inconvenience, particularly considering the close-knit relationship we share with our Canadian neighbors.

Community Impact

Walhalla is a community rich in history and natural beauty. It is home to the Pembina Gorge State Recreation Area, which is becoming North Dakota's 14th state park, and Frost Fire Park. As the second oldest settlement in the Dakotas, Walhalla boasts a wealth of historical significance and a vibrant cultural heritage. These attractions draw numerous visitors from both sides of the border, fostering tourism and economic growth.

However, the restricted hours at our local ports of entry hinder the free flow of visitors, negatively impacting local businesses and tourism. For instance, Riverside Campground in Walhalla has seen a decline in visitors, particularly Canadians who are unable to come down after work due to the early closure of the ports. If they attempt to come through the Pembina crossing, they face a significant detour, which discourages many from visiting altogether.

Walhalla, with a population of approximately 800 residents, has lost our longtime supper restaurant, a favorite among Canadian visitors. Jackson's Bar has seen a decline in business due to people not being able to come and enjoy themselves in the evenings. Kristi Stremick, owner of the Parcel Barn, has had to hold onto packages for extended periods because Canadians cannot come to pick them up after work.

Additionally, Johnson Farms and Stremick Farms, both Walhalla potato farmers, have experienced losses in sales and productivity as trucks sit idle due to the reduced hours. Floyd Clark, manager of Walhalla Co-op, mentioned losing three years' worth of business. The Co-op used to be open until 10 PM but now closes at 8 PM, reducing the availability for cross-border trade and cooperation.

Travelers would fill up with gas on their way back or grab snacks, even if traveling to Grand Forks or Fargo. Many residents in our communities have family in Canada, and these restrictions have strained family relationships. Some of those Grandparents have never been able to attend a school concert. Our town survives on Canadian business. City Councilman Leeroy Carpenter has shared that farm and construction companies have developed relationships with businesses in Winkler, making it easy to access parts quickly rather than traveling two hours to Grand Forks. Some parts aren't available in Grand Forks, but a 20-minute trip to Winkler used to solve this issue.

Neché, with a population of approximately 300 residents, faces similar challenges. As a parent of two children, I often find myself needing to make last-minute trips for necessities like an outfit for a school concert or supplies for other school events. The restricted hours make it difficult to quickly access Canadian stores that we have long relied on for such needs, adding stress and inconvenience to our daily lives.

Several residents attend church in Canada, which is typically a 10-mile trip. However, due to the restricted hours, they now face an hour-and-a-half journey to return home through the Pembina crossing.

The Walhalla and Maida ports would be the border crossings for the new state park, making their extended hours crucial for the park's success and accessibility.

Mayor Stuart Symington of Neche has expressed that with Neche and Gretna both being just a mile from the border, it's like cutting the town in half. This situation also strains our police resources. When our borders are understaffed, it's the residents who often find those crossing illegally and call it in to our local sheriff's department, diverting time and resources away from city needs.

Humanitarian Concerns

The lack of adequate border staff and reduced hours have also had severe humanitarian impacts. Families and individuals crossing illegally have been found in perilous conditions in our fields. Tragically, an Indian family was found deceased, and another family, a mother and two

small children, were found with frostbite. They cross illegally in our region due to being told it's easier to cross than the southern border, putting their lives at grave risk.

Economic and Social Importance

Our towns rely heavily on legal trade and travel with Canada. Efficient movement of goods and people helps address supply chain issues, supports agriculture, energy, and tourism. The restricted border hours severely hamper these critical aspects of our local economy.

The significance of the new state park cannot be overstated, particularly in light of the recent legislative approval. In 2023, the North Dakota Legislature allocated \$6 million for the development of new park facilities. Additionally, an additional \$2 million for the initial land development has been secured through a matching federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant.

This funding underscores the state's commitment to the park's success and highlights the importance of restoring extended hours at the Walhalla and Neche ports of entry. Ensuring convenient access for visitors from both sides of the border is essential to maximizing the park's potential as a regional attraction and economic driver.

Petition for Change

In the spring of 2023, the Walhalla Area Chamber of Commerce, along with the cities of Walhalla, Neche, and Cavalier, circulated a petition to restore the border crossing hours to their previous schedule. This petition garnered over 1,500 signatures, demonstrating the widespread support within our community for this change.

Conclusion

Restoring the previous operating hours at the Walhalla and Neche ports of entry is crucial for the well-being of our communities. It will alleviate confusion, support local businesses, and strengthen our cross-border relationships. We urge the committee to consider the voices of our citizens and take action to restore these hours, facilitating a return to normalcy and prosperity for the people of North Dakota and our Canadian friends.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Rebecca Davis
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