

Testimony of Congressman Brian Higgins before the Committee on Homeland Security

Thank you, Chair Bishop, and Ranking Member Ivey, for allowing me to testify. I served on this Committee for three terms. It is good to be back.

My name is Brian Higgins and I represent Buffalo, Niagara Falls, and Western New York in the House. It is good that you are having a hearing on the Northern Border today.

The United States and Canada have a unique and special relationship. We enjoy a shared border and shared values. I am a lifelong resident of Buffalo, New York. I have lived at the Northern Border my entire life.

My district is economically integrated with Southern Ontario. Buffalo is home to the Buffalo Bills football team and the Buffalo Sabres hockey team. Our community could not sustain them without Canadian season ticket holders. Nearly 4,000 United Auto Workers work at General Motors and Ford plants in Western New York. These plants - which help make combustion engine and electric vehicles - are in the stream of commerce with plants in Ontario.

The Buffalo airport has attracted low-cost airlines like JetBlue and Southwest because of proximity to the rapidly growing Toronto market. Western New Yorkers travel to Ikea in Ontario to furnish their homes. Canadian cars fill the parking lots at the Walden Galleria Mall in Cheektowaga, New York many weekends. Americans have owned cottages along Lake Erie in Bay Beach, Crystal Beach, and Sherkston for generations. Canadians ski at Ellicottville, New York. This productivity and life quality is possible because our Customs agents work every day to enforce and uphold our laws.

My district includes 4 land ports of entry and one rail crossing. They operate under treaties between the U.S. and Canada. At the bridges, our officers enforce our laws with great success.

Customs and Border Protection last year seized 60,000 pounds of drugs at our northern border, 98% of which were at our ports of entry. Our country asks a lot of these professionals. They did not sign up to be public health managers during the pandemic, but they have been forced to interpret confusing and inconsistent travel rules. And they are stretched too thin.

I oppose efforts to expand temporary duty travel. These assignments take officers away from their families and community for extended periods of time. I support the agreement that President Biden and Prime Minister Trudeau announced last week to address irregular migration. This collaboration shows we can work through challenges.

A lot more must be done. I have long publicly argued that our federal government does too little to support Northern Border communities. There should be a dedicated northern border infrastructure fund to pay for improvements to land ports of entry. By failing to invest, we have lost out on economic activity. There should be greater support for Sector Buffalo Coast Guard stations, something I have been advocating for since 2005 and is proceeding much too slowly.

Congress must also ensure that working conditions for border agents are optimal. This means funding an 8.6% cost of living increase in pay this year. We can also alleviate the strain of this work by increasing the number of officers, building on support from last year. It means funding for training – like expediting construction of a training facility in the Town of Lockport, New York and for resources to cope with mental health challenges. My community also needs more access to pre-clearance programs.

I urge you to push the Department to work with Canada to end the NEXUS backlogs that have piled up due to bureaucracy. You should also support my legislation to allow for more remote interviews – bringing trusted traveler programs into the 21st century. And we need your help pushing for pre-clearance at Niagara Falls train station and other settings.

I hope that this hearing can discuss these many challenges and think about practical solutions. In the last census, the population of the City of Buffalo increased for the first time in many decades. That increase was credited to the settlement of thousands of asylum seekers. Fleeing instability in far-away places, they have settled in Buffalo to make a new life. They are the latest generation to do so. I am the descendant of Irish immigrants whose predicament was not unlike these newcomers. I would say that many in this room may have a similar story in their histories as well.

As you conduct this hearing today, I hope we can all remember that shared humanity. Thank you.