



June 30, 2006

Prime Minister Steven Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2

RE: U.S. Visit July 6, 2006

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

I am writing on behalf of the Board of Directors, Members and Stakeholders of the Binational Tourism Alliance, a cross-border tourism trade organization based in Fort Erie, Ontario and Buffalo, New York.

We are aware that you will be meeting with President George W. Bush on July 6 to discuss various issues of importance to both our countries, and want to ensure that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative legislation is on your list of priorities for discussion.

As you know, this legislation is already having negative effects on cross-border economic and trade relationships, and our industry is extremely concerned with the future and permanent impact it will have on U.S./Canada travel and commerce.

On June 8, I provided testimony to the Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce in Ottawa with regards to WHTI. I also delivered a package of 64 Letters of Support/Municipal Resolutions, representing over 5 million Canadian and U.S. residents, over 20,000 businesses and their employees and over \$85 million dollars in lost or potentially lost business to your Ottawa office. We continue to receive these documents and currently have over 100 on file. This package contained a copy of the testimony provided to the Senate Committee, which I'm attaching to this letter for your review. It clearly outlines the BTA position on WHTI, economic impacts in the cross-border Niagara region and our support for the current U.S. Senate amendments to this legislation (Stevens/Leahy and Coleman May 2006, Slaughter/McHugh June 2006).

We are asking the Canadian Federal government – politicians and bureaucrats – to take a more proactive and visible role in this issue. We recognize that Ambassador Wilson and the Canadian Consulate offices are working diligently to get the right information out to U.S. officials in Washington and other parts of the U.S., and that you, Ministers Day and Mackay have already had meetings with your U.S. counterparts. But we feel very strongly that periodic meetings are not sufficient to resolve this issue in a manner that will satisfy the security and economic interests of both our countries for the long term.

There needs to be a concerted effort with Northern Border Caucus members, Congressional Friends of Canada and organizations like the Binational Tourism Alliance and BESTT Coalition to get accurate information to all U.S. states, legislators, business and tourism organizations and change the impression that Canada harbours terrorists and that our northern border is similar in any way to the U.S./Mexican border and its challenges – our social and business relationships are extremely different and many need to be educated about the important cross-border trade dependencies we share.

We also need to correct the misinformation that the general public currently holds concerning what identification is presently required to travel across the 49th parallel. The Binational Tourism Alliance developed a WHTI Action Plan in May 2006 (background information attached) and are preparing to roll out the third phase – an industry toolkit to assist in reducing the current confusion – followed shortly thereafter by a public awareness campaign, which we will request the Federal Government to partner in. We are also working with CBSA to improve public awareness of the NEXUS program and increase participation in this binational initiative – the most secure form of identification that currently exists, but that has never had appropriate promotion and should be enhanced to serve WHTI requirements (refer to Slaughter amendment in this regard).

To clarify our position, we DO NOT support the implementation of a passport or pass card as the sole solution to WHTI. There are existing forms of identification (drivers licenses, NEXUS/FAST, birth certificates), along with the current passports, that should and could be improved upon to meet the new identification/citizenship/security requirements. One form of I.D. will NOT serve all forms of travel or 49th parallel crossing points appropriately – it is critical that the approach taken to this issue is NOT “one size fits all” – it will not work in the best interests of either country.

We agree first and foremost with the need for delay to this legislation, and have seen this begin with the amendments approved by the Senate in May and June 2006 (Stevens/Leahy, Coleman; Immigration Bill and Senate Appropriations Committee just approved June 29). We do not want a delay for the sake of delay, but to ensure we get this right – both Canada and the U.S. are involved in the deliberations, all identification options are considered, economic impacts of the various options and the communities they affect are completed, improvements are made to existing processes and options before any new options are considered, proper pilot projects are undertaken for any of the agreed-upon options, and appropriate funding be allocated for a comprehensive public awareness campaign, staff training and operational implementation.

Most importantly, we want a commitment to strike a binational working group of industry practitioners and leaders, including our organization, to work with both federal governments to design and deliver the program – from both operational and promotional perspectives.

We ask that you make this a priority on your July 6 agenda with the President, and that you return to Canada with information that clearly indicates that Canadians and Americans will work together on this issue as we've outlined above.

The Binational Tourism Alliance is working diligently to impact changes to this legislation by supporting the amendment efforts of our U.S. colleagues, traveling to Ottawa and Washington to participate in WHTI roundtables and strategy sessions, as Senate Committee witnesses, and by implementing our WHTI Action Plan and NEXUS promotion programs, and keeping industry partners informed of progress made and next steps to be taken in this process. We are committed to working with our Provincial, State and Federal government partners on this issue, and can provide you with other information and research that supports changes to this legislation.

We wish you a successful trip to Washington and look forward to updates regarding a renewed commitment to Canadian leadership and partnership in the WHTI deliberations. Please feel free to contact me directly at 905-401-4450 should you wish to discuss further and I look forward to your response to this correspondence.

Sincerely Yours,

Arlene White

Arlene White, Executive Director
Binational Tourism Alliance

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