

Tech innovation is said to lack political support

By Diane Lindquist

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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TIJUANA – Technological innovation in the San Diego-Baja California cross-border region is being thwarted by a lack of government support and by inadequate international linkages, speakers at a high-tech development conference said here.

Despite the economic success of the North American Free Trade Agreement, there has been a lack of political will to encourage collaboration on innovation, said Jeffrey Davidow, president of the Institute of the Americas at UCSD and a former U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

He said a political obsession in both Mexico and the United States with problems associated with drug trafficking and immigration is at fault.

“I believe, at the end of the day, economic integration between the United States, Canada and Mexico will be based on technological innovation. There is no theme that is more important,” he told an audience of several hundred scientists, civic leaders, business executives and public officials from across Mexico.

The two-day event at the Camino Real Hotel, which ended yesterday, is a national gathering of the nonprofit Mexican Association of Directors in Technological Research and Development, known as ADIAT.

“We want to explore how to develop innovation in Mexico in collaboration with other countries,” said Carlos Duarte of Ensenada's Center for Scientific Research and Higher Education and ADIAT's secretary.

Among those who addressed the group were officials of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the Science Foundation of Ireland, a Chilean research group and Canada's National Research Council, the country's largest such organization.

Dennys Cooper, a Canadian National Research Council official, said the key to successful development of technology clusters – concentrations of like economic activities supported by government and academia – is to tap resources in other countries.

“Network, network, network,” he said. “The (clusters) must link internationally. That's a change since they were set up.

“You need key drivers in universities and companies. There must be champions in industry with government in a supporting role. Without those key drivers on both sides, you won't get there.”

Baja California Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther said his administration is committed to supporting such development on both sides of the border. But others, including Davidow, said Mexico's federal government has not made enough contributions to achieve success.

“Mexico has had many successes in the last few years,” he said, “but at the same time, there has been a lack of development of human and physical resources in the country.”

UCSD Associate Vice Chancellor Mary Walshok said she hoped two new studies will draw attention to the cross-border region's potential for technological development. San Diego Dialogue's “Borderless Innovation,” in collaboration with two Baja California educational institutions, identifies the activities of key technology sectors on both sides of the border. And a report by the San Diego Association of Governments revealed the economic losses the region is incurring because of waits at area border crossings.

Walshok said area leaders must address such issues to foment growth.

“We believe the Baja California-San Diego-Imperial County region – with about 7 million inhabitants – could become one of the most strategic hubs in the Americas for technological development.”

■ Diane Lindquist: (619) 293-1812; diane.lindquist@uniontrib.com

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