

San Diego and Baja California

Acting regionally, competing globally

By **Mary L. Walshok**

March 24, 2005

At a recent Museum of Natural History gala celebrating the rich and interdependent character of our crossborder ecology, not a single local politician or economic development official from the San Diego region was to be seen – not so from the Mexican side. In addition to the diverse business and civic leadership in attendance from both sides of the border, Mexican "officials" were present and visible.

There is an acute awareness among our friends and colleagues in Baja California of the tremendous challenges we face in these times of regional interdependency and global economic competitiveness. Our Mexican friends are much more connected in "official" ways than we are to forces in Asia, particularly Japan, China and Korea through expanding manufacturing partnerships.

Official Mexican forces also are connected to Europe in deeper and more complicated ways than we find in San Diego in part because they are perceived as a gateway to all the Americas. Mexico's growing awareness of the need to build infrastructure, education and training links, as well as business opportunities that enrich crossborder commerce and social development, exceeds our own.

Many researchers and commentators have observed the extent to which the state of Texas and its border communities have a long history of mutual respect and interaction with Mexico. California has been much slower to recognize and leverage its crossborder assets and opportunities. In an age of science and technology, when all forms of trade and industry are increasingly global and all local economies depend upon effective global strategies, it is deeply concerning that San Diego's business and political leadership is so inattentive to the distinctive opportunities presented by our unique border location.

CONACyT, the Mexican government's primary mechanism through which science and technology policy is shaped, has identified five regions in Mexico for significant growth in research and development and technology competitiveness. The San Diego-Tijuana region is one of the five. As a result, public officials in Baja California as well as Mexico City have been quietly investing in capacity building along the border and in the recent efforts by the San Diego Dialogue, among others, to build genuine collaborations between education and research-and-development institutions on both sides of the border.

This has been a lonely task in San Diego, in part, because San Diegans do not recognize that innovative research and development alone cannot guarantee our economic competitiveness. We are clearly blessed with extraordinary universities across the county and a rich array of globally competitive clusters in information technology, life sciences, composite materials and defense-related technologies. The density of research-and-development institutions on the Torrey Pines Mesa anchored by internationally recognized institutions such as the University of California San Diego, the Scripps Research Institute and the Salk Institute, represent tremendous assets.

However, competitiveness, even in high-tech products such as wireless telephony, pharmaceuticals, agriculture biotech and sporting goods, is determined by a proper mix of research and development, manufacturing, marketing and supplier relationships. Our exclusive focus on research and development and

innovation as the key to economic prosperity in San Diego could be a prescription for failure, given what we know is happening in regions such as the Silicon Valley and North Carolina's Research Triangle.

San Diego, in contrast to most regions across the United States, has a unique opportunity given its proximity to Mexico, to embrace and manage more components of the competitiveness equation. We have a 21st-century research-and-development platform across a diverse range of technologies on the Torrey Pines Mesa. And within 30 minutes along the Mexican border, there are tens of thousands of increasingly well-trained and high quality manufacturing workers, world-class facilities and increasingly sophisticated supplier networks.

Were our crossborder region to represent itself in a more unified manner, we would be unstoppable because of the richness and diversity of our technology clusters – medical devices, sporting goods, electronics, research and development and manufacturing, and increasingly automobile and aerospace manufacturing. These, combined with the diversifying research-and-development capabilities in the crossborder region, particularly in arenas such as agriculture, environmental sciences, marine biotechnology and now stem cells, could make us an unstoppable region in the increasingly competitive global economy.

We are truly "near neighbors." It is time to properly identify our complementary assets and to imaginatively grasp the potential synergies between those assets. By leveraging our distinctive crossborder capabilities, we can assure the long-term global competitiveness of our region.

■ Walshok is associate vice chancellor for public programs at the University of California San Diego and former chair of the board of governors of the San Diego Foundation.

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