

Construction begins at San Diego border crossing

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SAN DIEGO — The federal government has begun replacing the nation's busiest border crossing, promising shorter waits into California for tens of thousands of people who enter daily from Tijuana, Mexico.

The \$577 million blueprint unveiled Thursday calls for increasing the number of lanes into San Diego to 30 from 24 and equipping each lane with two inspection booths instead of one. Six existing lanes into Tijuana will be moved slightly to the west.

Construction is scheduled to finish in September 2015, though the date hinges on money. Congress has funded about half - \$293 million - none of it from the federal stimulus package.

Waiting times for the 50,000 vehicles that enter San Diego daily often reach two hours, clogging Tijuana roads. And as the Mexican government has beefed up inspections for guns and cash this year, motorists can wait more than an hour on California Interstates 5 and 805 to enter Tijuana.

Waits for California-bound motorists will drop significantly, but it's too early to say by how much, said Oscar Preciado, the program manager for U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The first phase, beginning this month, calls for an 800-foot pedestrian bridge that crosses Interstate 5. It is expected to be finished by June 2011.

Critics said the design is unfriendly to pedestrians, who will still have only one entry to Mexico, on the west side of Interstate 5. Pedestrians leaving the San Diego Trolley's last stop on the east side of the highway must walk across the bridge. Under the new design, government officials say that walk will be about 200 yards longer.

The General Services Administration said it is negotiating with Mexico to add a pedestrian entry to Tijuana on the east side of the highway.

"It's not a question of if, it's a question of how and when it will happen," said Anthony Kleppe, asset manager in the GSA's Pacific Rim region.

Vehicle lanes will be partially closed late evenings for short periods when the bridge is being built, authorities said. In the worst case, all Mexico-bound lanes will be closed at night for a week and motorists will be directed five miles east to San Diego's other border crossing with Tijuana.

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