

## **Cross-Border Perceptions**

By John Nienstedt

The latest KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that San Diegans are not keen on their Mexican neighbor to the south. Less than one-third of County residents hold a favorable impression of Tijuana, while 40% have an unfavorable opinion and 32% are either unsure or neutral. One-in-six hold a “very unfavorable” opinion of the city, while 12% say their impression is very favorable. Furthermore, most San Diegans do not cross the local border on a regular basis. Just one out of every ten San Diegans visits Tijuana more than once or twice per year and 4% make the trip every week. On the other hand 12% have never been to Tijuana. It is therefore not surprising to find that public opinion is divided on whether or not San Diego should develop closer civic ties with Tijuana. Thirty-seven percent favor closer ties, but 34% believe links between the cities are close enough as it is. Opinion is set squarely against creating an “open” border. Only 17% would like to see a more open border with less US government presence while 46% want the US to impose a more restrictive border.

### **Less than Stellar Reputation**

The survey shows that most San Diegans certainly do not perceive Tijuana to be a garden spot. However, the results also suggest that Tijuana’s civic leaders might have a legitimate quarrel with the US media’s portrayal of the city. Those who visit Tijuana regularly starkly disagree with non-visitors in their assessment of the city. Sixty-five percent of those crossing the border more than once per month have a favorable opinion of the city. Even among those who visit once or twice per year, impressions are actually more favorable than unfavorable. But 52% of those who have never set foot in the town – those with no first-hand knowledge -- have a negative impression of Tijuana.

### **Who Visits More Often?**

Since how often someone visits Tijuana is critically important to how the city is

perceived, it is important to examine who is likely to visit and who is not. The survey shows that Hispanic residents cross the border far more often than non-Hispanics. Seventy-six percent of San Diego County Hispanics travel to Tijuana at least once per year and 38% go at least every month. Among non-Hispanic whites the monthly figure is a paltry 7%, while 76% of them visit Tijuana less often than once per year or have never been to the city. The data also shows that Hispanics are more likely than others to go to visit family or friends. That Hispanics are maintaining their cultural ties to Mexico is clearly evidenced by this survey.

Our results show that males visit more frequently than females. Perhaps feeling more comfortable in a foreign country, 48% of men visit Tijuana once or more per year while 31% of women do so. Though many women visit Tijuana for the same reason, slightly more go to shop, eat or attend events. Men are more likely to head south for recreation and travel.

Younger residents are also more frequent visitors. The survey shows that 62% of 18 to 24 year-olds make their way to Tijuana at least once per year and 51% in the 25 to 34 year-old age group do so. Visitations decline steadily to the point where 80% of those over 74 years-old visit less than once per year. The survey revealed no differences between the age categories when it comes to why they visit Tijuana.

Finally, those who live closest to the border tend to cross it more frequently. Fifty-eight percent who live in the County's southern suburbs (defined as the cities of National City, Chula Vista, Coronado and Imperial Beach and the communities of San Ysidro, Bonita, Nestor and Otay Mesa) visit Tijuana more than once per year and 30% visit it once a month or more. Proximity clearly plays a role in visitation, as those in the north coastal region (Del Mar and north along the I-5 corridor) are the least likely to frequent Tijuana. This visitation data suggests that Tijuana's genuine "sphere of influence" is largely limited to the 11% of San Diego County which is closest to it. Therefore, while Tijuana's closest neighbors may consider themselves to reside in the Tijuana region, it is highly unlikely that residents in balance of the County do.

## **Reasons for Visiting**

Seventy-one percent of San Diegans visit Tijuana mainly for pleasure; that is for recreation or to shop, eat or attend events. Another 7% say they visit family and friends. Only 7% visit Tijuana for business, education or medical care. Even among regular visitors, over half visit for pleasure and 12% have business in the city. It is difficult to see how such an imbalance between the cities can lead to a truly interdependent relationship which eventually places San Diego and Tijuana on equal footing.

## **Debate over Closer Ties, but a Resounding “No” to a More Open Border**

San Diegans clearly do not want to see a more open US-Mexico border. In fact, 46% would like the border area to become more restrictive, while 30% like things the way they are. Not surprisingly this sentiment is strongest among people who visit Tijuana less often. Fifty-four percent who have never crossed the border feel it should be more restrictive and nearly half of those who visit Tijuana less than once per year concur. But even among those who regularly cross the border, support for a more open border stands at just 26%, while 37% favor a more restrictive border. We find similar results when we isolate those with very favorable impressions of Tijuana and those who desire closer ties to the city. Perceptions of Tijuana are apparently not the only factors driving resistance to less restrictions. Concerns about terrorists sneaking across the border evidently play a large role in the debate over open borders. It is clear that supporters of the open border concept have a very long way to go in the public opinion battle.

Though support for a less restrictive international border is quite weak, strengthening business and cultural ties between San Diego and Tijuana receives some support. With 37% of San Diegans saying they would like to see ties strengthened, 35% feeling ties are presently adequate and 16% unsure, there is no consensus on this point. Still, since only about 10% feel current ties are too strong, hostility toward more outreach is probably limited.

Again, frequent visitors to Tijuana are the vanguard which most endorses closer ties. Half of those who visit once per year or more want San Diego to develop closer business and cultural links while only 17% of the folks who have never been to Tijuana feel the same way. But, looking beyond this relationship between visitation and civic ties, a sort of cosmopolitan attitude surfaces. The survey finds that those who are more supportive of tax increases are significantly more likely to support closer ties as are those who live in the City of San Diego. The City is less conservative than the suburbs.

## **Conclusion**

San Diegans generally posit the relationship of their region to the border city as one that is separate and unequal. Tijuana's image problems appear to keep a substantial number of San Diegans from visiting or returning. Still, the city does have some fans among the County's large Hispanic population, the young and those in the southern portion of the County. The overwhelming majority of those who visit continue to use Tijuana as a playground, not as a business partner. Far more residents seek tighter restrictions at the border than a more open barrier between the two countries. On the other hand, public opinion is open to the possibility of closer civic ties between San Diego and Tijuana. In sum, it is difficult to find evidence that San Diegans think of Tijuana as a partner in the region. Instead, residents generally cast a wary eye south of the border.