

## BUSINESS LEADERS ALONG BORDER DECRY VISITOR TRACKING PLAN

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Laredo, Texas - Business leaders along the Texas-Mexico border worry that a federal effort to electronically track foreign visitors and their visas will hurt their bottom lines.

Within two years, the Homeland Security Department will require visitors to submit a digital photograph and a set of inkless fingerprints. Confirmation prints and a photo will be taken again when a visitor leaves.

Under the program called United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology, or U.S.-VISIT, a nationwide database will allow the government to pinpoint people who haven't left when their time is up.

Officials in the Rio Grande Valley say the system could significantly affect traffic, commerce, tourism and the underground economy.

"I expect there to be long lines of traffic. That's going to discourage some of the Mexican shoppers who come to the border to shop and do business," said Gerry Schwebel, director of the international department at International Bank of Commerce in Laredo.

"It's easy for somebody in Washington to say, 'What's the big deal?' They don't have any idea what it means," he told the San Antonio Express-News in Friday's editions. "Everything seems to fall under the anti-terrorism efforts, which we all support, but at the cost of hampering our local economy? I believe we should have a say before it's implemented."

The department plans to begin the program next month at Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport. It is to be implemented by Jan. 5 at 115 airports and 14 seaports. By the end of next year, the system is to be installed at the 50 busiest land crossing points, including Laredo.

Federal officials said they think the business leaders' fears are unfounded.

"The new procedures are expected to add just seconds to the entry and exit process," Asa Hutchinson, undersecretary for Border and Transportation Security, said in a statement.

But Jorge Gonzalez, chairman of the economics department at Trinity University in San Antonio, said those extra seconds could add up.

"I am really afraid that they are going to implement it before they understand the consequences of the policy," he said.