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Keep goods, people flowing across border

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It's a relationship so natural and so positive that we often take it for granted: Canada and the United States. Seldom contentious, rarely dramatic but the most productive bilateral relationship in the world.

For people living in this part of our shared continent, our daily interactions are a way of life that has been running smoothly for many, many decades. We make things together, we visit each other and we are the best of friends, business partners and allies.

Last year, two-way trade between Washington state and Canada was worth more than \$19 billion. At every hour of the day, more than \$2 million in trade crosses the border between Washington and British Columbia.

The 578 Canadian-owned businesses in Washington employ more than 18,300 residents. On top of that, 153,000 jobs in the state depend directly on the flow of goods and services across the Canadian border -- 44,000 of those jobs are in King County alone.

Companies on both sides of the border greatly benefit from this efficient integrated supply chain and trade. In Seattle, 4Culture, Sparling Inc. and Soft Resources and Bellevue's Buckley-Christison are just a few of the U.S. firms supporting the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. These are also firsthand examples of how an efficient supply chain -- the flow of materials involved in producing a product from start to finish -- profit both countries, and must be maintained and enhanced.

Like Americans, Canadians insist on being secure but without stifling our entrepreneurial vigor and business innovation. With the extension of new U.S. rules for travel documents to cross the border to land and water travel, Canada and the U.S. must make sure that our border provides gateways to prosperity, not cumbersome checkpoints that stifle competitiveness.

Canada is seeking an extension of the phase-in period of the new document requirements. On the present timetable, Canadians and Americans do not have time to get the documents they will need. Neither country can afford the kind of backlog that both passport agencies experienced last winter when the new documentary requirements were implemented for air travelers. Many more travelers cross by land, and there needs to be a realistic and transparent plan to ensure that legitimate tourism and trade can continue without disruption.

Too much is at stake if we do not get the border right. Whether it is forestry products, aviation components or cross-border tourism, the relationship means jobs and economic prosperity. It is our joint responsibility to put in place effective border strategies that minimize security risks while facilitating the efficient movement of goods, services and people.

Michael Wilson is the Canadian ambassador to the U.S. He will speak Wednesday at the Rotary Club of Seattle. To watch his speech online, beginning Friday, go to SeattleRotary.org and click on "Watch Our Rotary Speakers."

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