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# Guest: Say no to a U.S.-Canada border-crossing fee

Adding a U.S.-Canada border fee would have significant negative impacts, writes guest columnist Donald Alper.

By [Donald Alper](#)  
 Special to *The Times*

THE U.S. government has expressed interest in possibly instituting a new border-crossing fee at land borders. At this stage, the proposal is just a request by President Obama's administration to study the effect of collecting a crossing fee for pedestrians and passenger vehicles along the Canadian and Mexican land borders.

A fee would help recover the costs of upgrades on the northern and southern borders, including adding hundreds of U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers and new technology.

Adding a border fee to existing border-control measures likely would have significant negative impacts.

For many potential visitors to our state, a border fee would be a disincentive. Ninety-five percent of international visits to our state originate in Canada, and 96 percent of those come from British Columbia. These visitors contribute more than \$420 million in revenue to Washington businesses and more in taxes.

Even a modest border-crossing fee could deter these discretionary travelers. Border policy needs to encourage, not discourage, these visitors.

A border fee would add an additional layer of regulation on an already overregulated border. The recent Beyond the Border accord launched by President Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was intended to streamline border crossings for goods and people. The goal of the accord was to reduce barriers to travel and commerce. A border fee does the opposite.

Border agents are in the business of law enforcement, not collecting tolls. Their working environment is focused on stopping drug smuggling, terrorists, money laundering, undocumented entry of individuals, weapon trafficking, smuggling of prohibited goods and a host of customs violations.

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 The flag-bedecked top of the Peace Arch marks the U.S. border with Canada in Blaine.

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Taking money would be a distraction and inconsistent with the primary security functions at the border. Hiring additional personnel to collect money would be costly and probably defeat the purpose of the border fee.

Infrastructure and legal issues present further problems. Space is at a premium at many of our border crossings. A toll-collection mechanism would require separate infrastructure outside of the secure portions of the ports of entry.

At Blaine, traffic lanes approaching the border are fully utilized to facilitate primary border functions. Adding lanes or stations is constrained by geography. There are also legal issues such as whether or not someone could be denied entry for nonpayment of tolls.

Finally, is this a message we really want to send?

We should want the border to be a bridge, not a barrier to interaction with our neighbors. Since on the northern border Canadians are the primary target of the fee, the message would be clear — you need to pay for the privilege of crossing to shop, recreate or conduct your business in the United States. This is not the way to treat neighbors and customers.

Our land-border crossings are vital conduits for north-south trade, tourism and social interaction for border communities. Border-control operations should be limited to their essential purpose: to stop illegal movement of people and goods and deter potential border crossers who pose a threat to the country.

A border fee would be shortsighted and add more complications to relations with our neighbors.

*Donald Alper is a political-science professor and director of the Center for Canadian-American Studies and the Border Policy Research Institute at Western Washington University.*

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