
THE INTERNATIONAL GATEWAY

GOALS

- Develop the border crossing as an International Gateway—a grand entrance into the United States, the City of San Diego, and the community of San Ysidro that serves as a center of cultural exchange and commerce serving both the tourist and the resident population.
- Recognize and capitalize on the opportunities provided by the world’s busiest border crossing. Tap this outstanding economic opportunity and invest it back into the community.
- Foster an active working relationship, a cultural exchange and an economic partnership with Mexico.
- Develop an International Gateway that is sensitive to the security and safety issues associated with undocumented immigration and crime.
- Reduce dependency on the Mexican consumer and provide incentives for tourists traveling to Tijuana to linger and purchase goods and services in San Ysidro.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Tourism and the International Gateway

The location of the International Gateway is generally along San Ysidro Boulevard, north of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, and south of I-805 and along Camino de la Plaza west of I-5. It is a major entrance into San Ysidro, San Diego, the United States and Mexico; however, traffic congestion, litter, overburdened sewers and storm drains, and visual clutter all detract from its potential. Visitors enter the area, buy gas and auto insurance, exchange money, and cross into Tijuana. Community residents seldom enter except to cross into Mexico.



The San Ysidro Port of Entry, at the hub of the International Gateway area, is reported to be the world's busiest border crossing. According to United States Customs, it was crossed by approximately 53 million people in 1988—an average of 10 million northbound pedestrians and 12 million northbound vehicles. American tourists, going to Tijuana on a typical holiday weekend, number about seven times San Ysidro's population.

Despite the community's proximity to the border, San Ysidro businesses have not been able to benefit from this potential market (American tourists make up only 15 percent of the customer base) because there are few tourist facilities or amenities. Instead, the community's businesses have been dependent on the Mexican economy. As a result, as the Mexican economy has faltered throughout the 1980s, San Ysidro businesses have lost their economic vitality, particularly on San Ysidro Boulevard (as indicated by the physical deterioration of commercial structures, a lack of variety in commercial services available, and a large amount of vacant tenant space). (See also the **Commercial Element**.) Discussed below are several of the conditions which have contributed to the unrealized potential of the International Gateway:

- There is a lack of public cultural exchange and entertainment activities, for example festivals and parades, and no public urban space in which to promote them.
- There are few good restaurants and shops to attract residents and visitors to linger in the area.
- There are no public restroom facilities to serve visitors going to and coming from Mexico. (Many tourists utilize nearby restaurant facilities as a rest stop.)
- There is a shortage of secure parking.
- Providers of Mexican insurance and “casas de cambio” (money exchange houses) are scattered throughout the commercial areas of the community, causing traffic congestion and confusion among tourists as they search for these businesses.
- There is no signage to direct tourists to parking areas, insurance providers and money exchange houses, contributing further to the traffic congestion.
- The International Gateway at the Border Trolley Station is congested with many different types of vehicular traffic including the trolley, jitneys, buses, taxis, passenger cars and service vehicles. These vehicles conflict with one another and threaten the safety of the many pedestrians that use this area. In addition, the large volume of pedestrians crossing at the border gate makes it difficult to move across the border.
- The entrances into the community (especially at the border crossing) are ill-defined. The existing sign is unattractive, not highly visible, and poorly maintained. It is also located at an inappropriate location well within the community, near the San Ysidro Boulevard and Border Village Road intersection.
- The Virginia Avenue commercial crossing (a one-way crossing west of I-5 which permits southbound commercial traffic only) has an uncertain future. It could be closed within several years. (See also **Industrial Element**.)

- The International Gateway area, however, could be enhanced by quality building and urban design, the rehabilitation of existing structures, increased landscaping, and improved traffic circulation and by providing for important needs such as public restrooms, improved transit, and expanded customs facilities. San Ysidro has a close cultural and commercial trade relationship with Mexico which should be fostered, developed and allowed to grow.

The Underground Economy

The underground economy in San Ysidro has been fueled in recent years by the Mexican peso devaluation and by illegal immigration. It has been said that illegal actions occur at money exchange houses. Also, large numbers of Mexican immigrants illegally cross into the United States, a number that grows as the Mexican economy weakens.



The money exchange houses or “casas de cambio” started to appear in 1981 when the Mexican government allowed for a floating peso which resulted in a wildly fluctuating exchange rate. Casas de cambio were quickly constructed, primarily along San Ysidro Boulevard. It is estimated that there are approximately 300 of these businesses. Most of them are owned, according to many community residents, by several major out-of-state companies.

Many of the casas de cambio:

- Violate sign and building codes.
- Have been reported as charging hidden fees and advertising falsely.
- Are scattered along the length of San Ysidro Boulevard.
- Are located on sites not zoned for financial institutions.

The casas de cambio have been difficult to regulate because most are very small structures (usually small wood-frame structures or trailers of less than 100 square feet) and therefore are not required to obtain building permits. However, in 1988, the Money Exchange Ordinance established casas de cambio as police-regulated businesses and they must obtain business licenses (similar to card rooms and dance halls). In addition to checking for legal business transactions, the police perform a secondary role by inspecting the establishment to ensure that it meets all zoning, health, fire, sign and building regulations as set forth in the Municipal Code. As the peso stabilizes, it is believed that the number of money exchange businesses will diminish significantly.

Mexico's unstable economy has had an additional effect. Each time the peso value fluctuates, "Mexican flight" capital is deposited into San Ysidro banks. (These are the funds that Mexicans place, in dollars, in American banks to avoid losses due to peso devaluations.) For a community of its size, San Ysidro has an unusually large number of banks (six). These banks, however, tend to serve as depositories only and according to local merchants, have not invested back into the community.



The most important effect of Mexico's unstable economy has been the illegal immigration of Mexicans crossing into the United States. The Border Patrol makes approximately 1,200 apprehensions a day in San Diego County, most of them in the San Ysidro area. They estimated that this is only 35 to 45 percent of the illegal crossings number, approximately one sixth of the

population of San Ysidro. The Border Patrol, in response to the almost constant flow of illegal immigration, covers the border day and night. Their late-night helicopter patrols disturb the community with noise and searchlights.

This situation has created a feeling of insecurity, oppression, tension and fear among San Ysidro residents. Residents fear the immigrants because they associate crime problems with them. (Although some crime is attributed to the undocumented immigrant, they are often the victims. According to the City of San Diego Southern Division police, there is a great deal of violent crime being committed by "alien robbers" or highwaymen against the vulnerable immigrant especially at night and in the area of the levee of the Tijuana River.) In addition, the Immigration Detention and Border Patrol Center, headquarters for one of the largest single concentrations of patrol agents in the United States, is inappropriately located in the center of this Hispanic community and is adjacent to schools and residential developments. When the facility was built, in the late 1950s, it was surrounded on three sides by vacant land and most of the residential population was concentrated to the south.

OBJECTIVES

Tourism and the International Gateway

To realize the potential of the existing border crossing:

- Capitalize on the colorful excitement of the meeting of two cultures and on the hustle and bustle of millions of people crossing the border here.
- Develop the area immediately adjacent to the border as an International Gateway, a richer, symbolic image of entry into San Ysidro, San Diego and the United States.



- Create a sense of entry into the community through the special treatment of all major entry points.
- Increase commercial retail development at the border to capture tourist dollars.
- Attract tourists by developing projects which offer entertainment and cultural activities.
- Design tourist attractions to be visible and accessible from the freeway, yet compatible with existing development within the community.
- Develop distinctively and innovatively designed projects.
- Promote outdoor activity with sidewalk cafes, public outdoor spaces and open areas, and pedestrian-oriented shopping plazas.
- Improve the transportation system at the border to provide for the smooth flow of traffic and minimize conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians.
- Increase the availability of secure parking for visitors at the border.
- Direct tourist traffic to the tourist-serving commercial areas.

Underground Economy

- Minimize disturbances due to border patrol operations and illegal immigration from Mexico.
- Improve the relationship between the community and the Border Patrol by opening lines of communications so that residents feel secure, but not intimidated by Border Patrol activity.
- Reduce dependency on the Mexican economy.
- Invite bank participation in San Ysidro business community organizations.
- Define a southern edge for the community at the border.

RECOMMENDATIONS

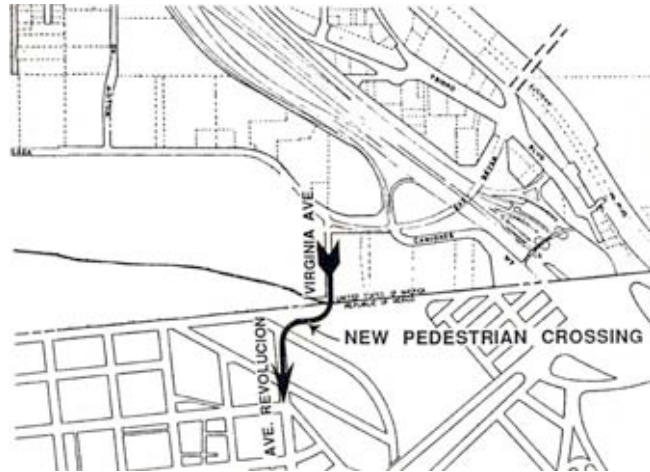
Tourism and the International Gateway

(See also the **Urban Form Element**.)

Transportation and Circulation

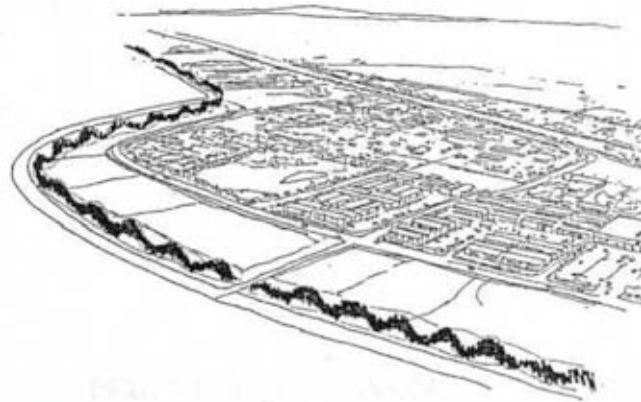
1. Request Caltrans to install effective directional signage on the freeway to direct tourists to use the Camino de la Plaza exit and include parking information. This exit accesses the tourist-serving commercial area and the border gate.
2. Install effective directional signage on the community's major thoroughfares, such as Via de San Ysidro, San Ysidro Boulevard, and Camino de la Plaza to direct tourist traffic to the border gate and the tourist-serving commercial areas south of I-805 and west of I-5. Include parking and visitor center location information.

3. Explore the feasibility of opening a new pedestrian and bicyclist border crossing at Virginia Avenue (site of the existing commercial gate) to facilitate tourist traffic flow between San Ysidro and Avenida Revolucion, the main shopping district in Tijuana, and to ease pedestrian loading and unloading facilities. (See **Transportation and Circulation Element.**)



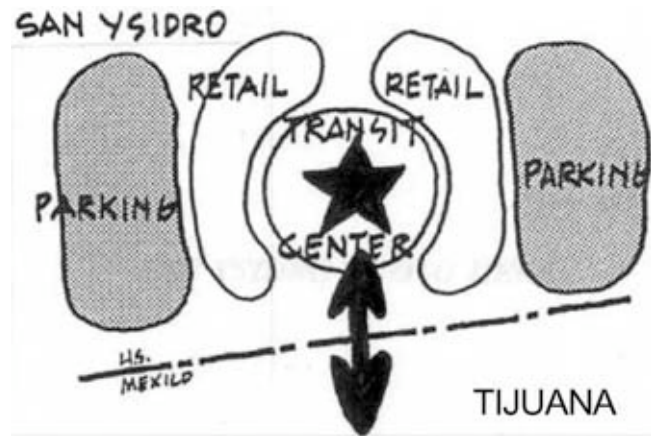
4. Identify the major entrances to the community using landscaping and attractive signage, architectural forms, or other markers. Potential sites include the border crossing, San Ysidro and Dairy Mart Road, SR-905 and Smythe Avenue, SR-905 and Beyer Boulevard, and the Via de San Ysidro and San Ysidro Boulevard.
 - a. Redesign the existing entrance sign and relocate it to one of the major entrances into the community such as San Ysidro Boulevard at the Border Trolley Station.
5. Improve pedestrian accessibility to tourist-oriented portions of the community by enhancing the design of pedestrian bridges across I-5 and I-805. (See also the **Urban Form and Transportation and Circulation Elements.**)
 - a. These bridges could also serve as gateways to the community, just as the Cabrillo Bridge in Balboa Park serves as a gateway to downtown. Sponsor a design competition for an International Gateway similar to the competition held in 1988 for gateways into the City of San Diego.

6. With the assistance of MTDB, develop a multi-modal transit terminal at the border gate to incorporate the existing trolley station, bus stations, taxi stands, jitney stops, bicycle racks and lockers, and passenger drop offs and to safely separate these vehicular uses from pedestrians. Include effective signage to direct traffic to and from the area.



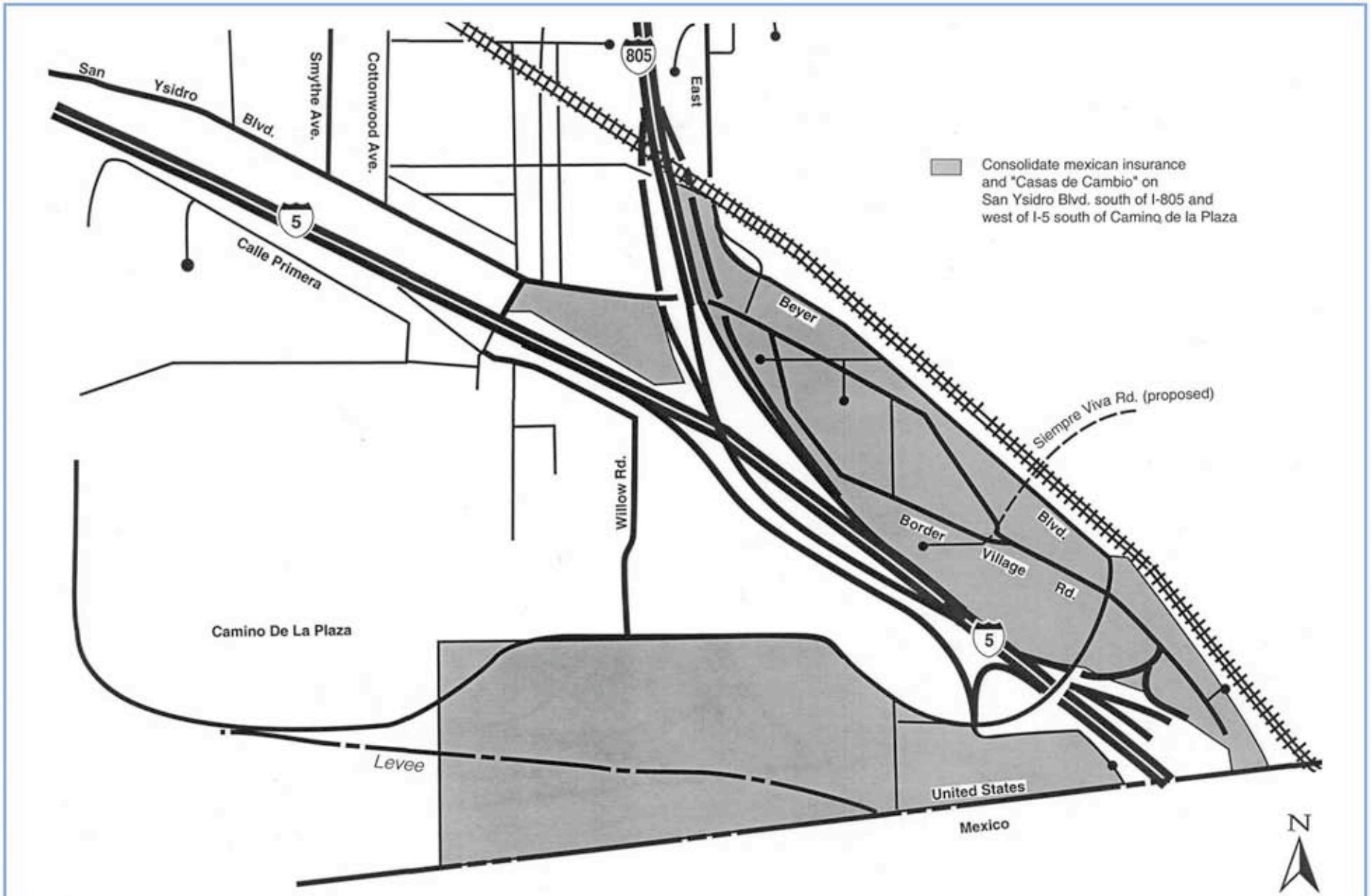
7. Establish a Special Parking District near the border crossing to provide adequate, easily accessible parking on the perimeter of a multi-modal transit center. This would help to eliminate vehicular and pedestrian conflict. (See **Transportation and Circulation Element.**)

8. Discourage through traffic on San Ysidro Boulevard at the Border Trolley Station. Use signage to direct tourists to parking areas, passenger drop off points and the freeway. These actions will ease traffic congestion at the Border Trolley Station and enhance its pedestrian environment. Use special paving and “knuckles” to further define the area’s sense of place. (See also **Transportation and Circulation Element, Figure 28.**)



Tourist Facilities and Attractions

1. Increase the portion of the Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT), a tax on hotel/motel visitors, that is invested in the San Ysidro community.
2. Establish a Transient Maintenance Tax (similar to the citywide Transient Occupancy Tax) to be used as a source of funding for maintenance and provisions of facilities used by the visiting public. Services and items taxed would include visitor-oriented hotels, restaurants, casas de cambio and retail items.
3. In 1989, several groups and individuals involved in federal and state government-proposed legislation to exact tolls at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. These proposals should require that a specified portion of the revenues collected go to the community of San Ysidro to fund physical improvements to the border area.
4. Provide a visitor information center at the Border Trolley Station.
5. Provide a public restroom facility in the vicinity of the Border Trolley Station.
6. Develop a new hotel/resort complex immediately adjacent to the border gate, in the vicinity of the Border Trolley Station. (See also the following section, **International Gateway Districts**, “Grand Central Station.”)
7. Develop an attraction, such as a dinner theater, for tourists who are still “thinking Mexico” upon their return from Tijuana.
8. Develop good, sit-down restaurants to attract tourists and residents in the tourist-oriented districts, including San Ysidro Boulevard south of I-805, and at Camino de La Plaza west of I-5.
9. Develop tourist attractions such as shops selling “artesanias” (arts and crafts), fruits, vegetables, and Mexican herbs and spices, restaurants, and art exhibits. Tourism invests money into the community, although it provides primarily minimum-wage jobs.



Consolidation of Mexican Insurance Establishments & "Casa de Cambio" Map
San Ysidro Community Plan

13
 FIGURE

10. Create a unique tourist attraction that may not be available in Mexico, such as a center with shops and restaurants offering crafts, services and cuisines from all regions of Mexico.
11. Redevelop San Ysidro Square (the Vons/Longs site) as a “Farmers’ Market” similar to Tianguis El Monte facility in the Los Angeles area (a branch of Vons Grocery Company specializing in Mexican food). (See also the **Commercial Element**.)
12. Develop a financial and postal center near the border gate to serve the Mexican consumer.
13. Sponsor joint City of San Diego/Tijuana public events such as Binational Independence Day parades and festivals.
14. Locate cultural exchanges between San Diego and Mexico, such as the Ballet Folklorico, City Council Meetings, and art exhibits, at the International Gateway.
15. Develop a bilingual movie theater. The theater would be a regional and community attraction offering English language and Spanish language films with subtitles. (See **Commercial Element**.)
16. Construct a kiosk that marks the southern terminus of the Pacific Coast Bicentennial bike route, provides vicinity maps of San Ysidro and Tijuana and information of interest to bicycling tourists. This kiosk should be located at the cul-de-sac on Camiones Way.

Underground Economy

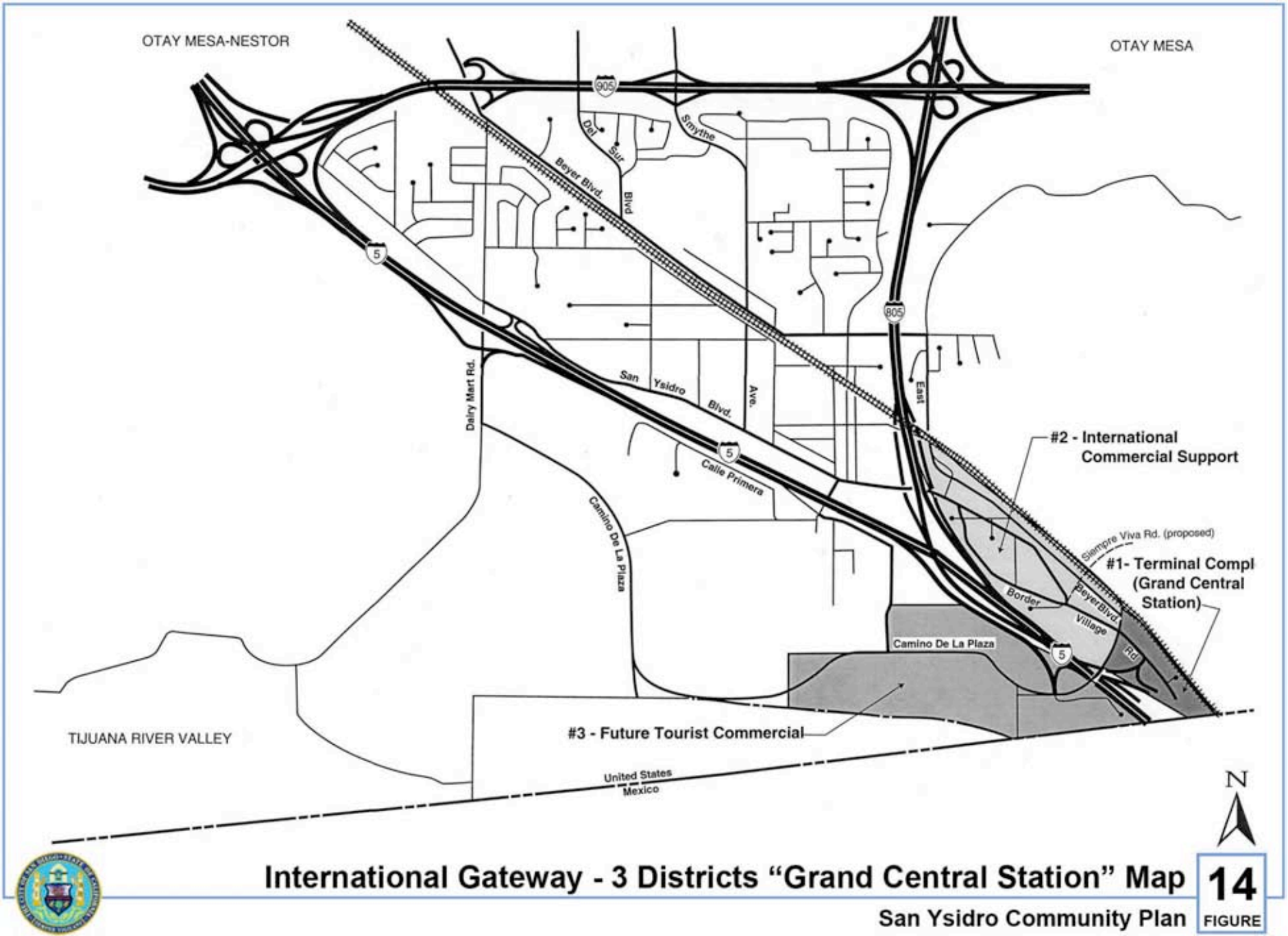
Casas de Cambio

(See **Urban Form Element** for design guidelines.)

1. Regulate the casas de cambio as required by the Money Exchange Ordinance. According to that ordinance, each business is required to obtain a license from the Chief of Police, the applicant is required to submit to a background check, and the business will be inspected to ensure that it meets required codes.
2. Consolidate casas de cambio and Mexican insurance into one general location on San Ysidro Boulevard south of I-805, and west of I-5, south of Camino de la Plaza, to reduce traffic congestion and confusion as tourists search for these uses. (See **Figure 13**.)

Financial Institutions

1. Increase investment by banks in the community (i.e., loans to local businesses and residents) through a public loan program.
2. Form a San Ysidro Credit Union to provide competitive rate loans to local businesses and residents. Several community members have suggested that San Ysidro School District employees could provide the initial customer base, which could later be expanded to serve the entire community.



International Gateway - 3 Districts "Grand Central Station" Map

San Ysidro Community Plan

14
FIGURE



Border Issues

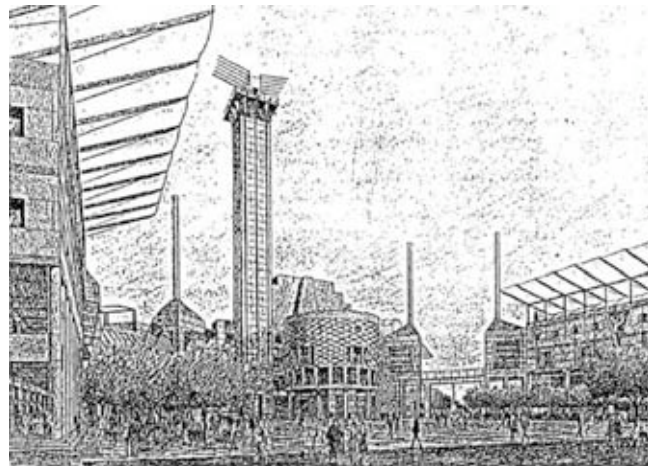
1. Work with the Police Department Crime Prevention Unit and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to provide for “defensible design” of development projects.
2. Relocate the INS Detention Center and Border Patrol Headquarters to Brown Field on the Otay Mesa or to an alternative site on the outskirts of the San Ysidro community.
3. Convert the existing INS Detention Center and Border Patrol Headquarters to a community park (see **Parks, Recreation and Open Space Element**).



International Gateway Districts

To form a framework for the above recommendations, three districts within the International Gateway area have been identified and conceptual plans proposed for each. (See **Figure 14**.) These are:

1. A “Grand Central Station” immediately adjacent to the border crossing. This station would be a bold and dramatic architectural statement that would include a terminal complex (a bus, jitney, trolley and taxi transit center), a hotel, shops, and an entertainment center. It would be designed to discourage automobile traffic. Vehicular traffic on San Ysidro Boulevard from the end of East Beyer Boulevard to the border would be limited to emergency and service vehicles and those entering the freeway south of Camino de la Plaza. (See **Transportation and Circulation Element, Figure 28**.) The concept would require “packaged” development to assemble and consolidate parcels.



**“Grand Central Station”
A Bold and Dramatic Architectural Statement**

2. An area of “International Commercial Support” which would serve as a transition from the International Border to the neighborhood-serving commercial area north of the border crossing. This area would allow some auto-oriented commercial uses and include some tourist parking, yet also enhance the existing pedestrian use of this area.
3. An area of “Future Tourist Commercial” west of the border crossing which would develop as the need arose. In this area, a master planned development, to include professional office, tourist parking, tourist-oriented commercial, and heavy commercial development, is recommended. A landscaped buffer along the Tijuana River channel is also recommended to mitigate disturbances from Border Patrol operations. The Plan would capitalize on the millions of tourists that cross the border through San Ysidro every year and provide a buffer between the tourist-oriented uses of this district and the residential and community oriented commercial portions of the community. One possible development scenario is to use a tourist parking lot component of a commercial project (an immediate profit maker) as an attraction to the development and to partially subsidize the retail component of the project.

To implement these concepts, the creation of a Redevelopment Project Area is recommended. The San Ysidro Revitalization Project could act for the Redevelopment Agency. Redevelopment activities could include assembling parcels and developing projects or locating developers and “package” deals. (See the **Commercial Element**.) In addition, as a Redevelopment Project Area, revenue from increased property taxes due to increased property values and ownership turnover would go to the area. These revenues would be used for commercial revitalization which would ultimately attract future development.