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## Border conference's relevance in decline

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Twenty-nine years ago, the Border Governors' Conference was founded with the objective of bringing together the 10 U.S.-Mexico border governors (six from the Mexican side and four from the U.S. side), their staffs, and key players in the public and private sectors on an annual basis. Prior to the annual meeting, held each year in a different border state, various "worktable" groups meet to discuss various issues that are of common importance to the border region. These issues include economic development, security, tourism, infrastructure and health.

Throughout the year, the worktables, made up of representatives of the 10 border states, work on these issues and develop various suggestions or plans of action that are then discussed by the 10 border governors at the BGC meeting. The governors then issue a joint communiqué that is sent to the U.S. and Mexican presidents to either call for their support or to suggest a specific course of action on certain items.

This year, the BGC was held on Sept. 28 and 29 in Ensenada, Baja California. Only the governors of Baja California (the host), Chihuahua and Sonora were in attendance from the Mexican side. On the U.S. side, only New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez was in attendance. Most of the absent governors issued statements that they could not attend due to previous commitments, important pending legislation or domestic issues that demanded their utmost attention.

In the first ten years of the BGC, this event was one of the major conferences on the border, attended by hundreds of people directly involved or interested in common issues. I used to look forward to attending the BGC to meet friends from both sides of the border in order to take the pulse on what was going on. However, I have not regularly attended BGC meetings for the past 10 years because it seemed to me that the BGC was not producing anything of real substance.

Participation by the business sector in the BGC has dropped off over the years. In the past, even if the BGC really didn't accomplish much, it was a vehicle to bring diverse business and nongovernmental interests together in order to network and to share information. In the past, many important contacts and business were generated at these well-attended events.

One challenge that the BGC continuously faces is that new gubernatorial administrations take office and the new government people don't have institutional knowledge of what has been attempted or discussed before. This has resulted in items in the joint communiqués being recycled every few years. With the publishing of this year's communiqué, I have now seen the concept of developing economic clusters among the 10 border states pop up no fewer than three times. About 10 years ago, I was part of the cross-border worktable that actually studied clusters and tried to understand what would and would not work between the Mexican and U.S. border states.

Another issue affecting the viability of the BGC is politics, which have become a way to use the BGC to attack policies in BGC member states. Years ago, California decided to decrease its participation in the BGC because the Mexican states banded together against California Gov. Pete Wilson's effort to pass Proposition 187, which would limit the access to social services by illegal immigrants. The Mexican states attempted to use the BGC to humiliate and attack California for supporting this measure. Last year when Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer adopted a strong stance on illegal immigration, she was vilified by both Mexican and U.S. border governors. As the host of the conference, she decided to avoid the drama that would ensue and opted for cancelation. Seeing an opportunity to have his own high-profile gathering, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson invited the 10 border governors to his own meeting in Santa Fe, but was the only U.S. governor to attend and nothing tangible was achieved.

Common issues affecting the 10 U.S.-Mexico border states, such as security, infrastructure and bottlenecks to trade, are more important than ever, but the BGC as a vehicle to address these issues has lost its prominence. It is more important than ever for the BGC to serve as an effective vehicle to bring the 10 border governors and their delegations together to work on border issues. One possible solution that was investigated years ago was to institutionalize the BGC with a professionally contracted group arranging the worktables and BGC meetings, and the follow-up for any items that ultimately were published in the joint communiqué. This would retain the institutional knowledge that is critical in moving issues forward. Perhaps it is time to again explore this approach.

New Mexico will be the host of the 2012 BGC, which will be held in Albuquerque. Gov. Martinez has announced a unique strategy of reminding her colleagues of the date, much like one would do when inviting guests to a wedding, to avoid low attendance. The border stakeholders must increase their participation within the BGC to again make this organization relevant. A strong BGC is needed more than ever.

Jerry Pacheco is the executive director of the International Business Accelerator, a nonprofit trade counseling program of the New Mexico Small Business Development Centers Network. He can be reached at 575-589-2200 or at [jerry@nmiba.com](mailto:jerry@nmiba.com).