

*Editorial Case Study*  
*By Richard P. McGaffigan*

**“Border parking lots islands of crime”**

**Background:** The Binational Policy Council, a coalition of community organizations, Businesses and law enforcement agencies, has taken on the task to reduce alcohol related trauma in the border community. To this end, the work group on the U.S. side of the border identified four-issue track to address this serious problem and four committees emerged to define the root causes underlying each issue. The goal of each committee was to design specific recommendations and the strategy to achieve implementation.

The Parking Lot Business / Law enforcement Committee solicited participation of all seven parking lots in the border region. This committee was established due to the high crime rate in the parking lots by intoxicated revelers returning from Mexico. The San Diego Police Department ended up being the security detail for many of the parking lots. Initially, there was representation from San Diego Police Department, Community Members, Neighborhood Code Compliance, and one or two of the parking lot owners who represented the lots with the fewest problems. We continued to step up our recruiting efforts during the first three months of meetings by sending letters with follow up calls, to sending the letters from the police department, to assembling a police call report specifying calls to each parking lot address to get the owners attention. The San Diego Police Department along with Code Compliance offered to perform an environmental survey with each of the businesses to help them assess their security and public safety for their business. Following six months of trying to coerce parking lot owner voluntary participation in the process, it was decided to disband the committee and move the issue into the public safety infrastructure committee. At this time, we began looking into how we could amend the conditional use permit for these businesses to provide sufficient public safety measures for their customers as well as improve the image of the community as a whole.

The policy recommendation generated by this committee was to create specific standards to enhance the public safety of parking lot businesses through modification of their conditional use permits. In addition, recommend that the San Ysidro Community Plan be amended to include specific public safety standards for renewals of conditional use permits, new permits and new developments and the San Diego Police Department’s Southern Division be part of the review process.

Information to support these recommendations were compiled and specific public safety standards are being developed to present to the San Diego City Planning Department and support is being solicited from San Diego City Council officials.

**The Pitch:** While we were going through this process of developing recommendations, there was an assault of a young man from Orange County in one of the largest parking lots by three intoxicated young men. The victim was seriously injured and the District Attorney was pressing “hate crime” charges. The whole incident was

video taped by the sole employee on duty in a booth. The perpetrators got away that evening yet where apprehended about a week later. The incident and the trial to follow was in the news quite a bit. Letters to the editor called for action to be done to prevent such an attack.

I was going to write a letter to the editor, yet I felt it might warrant an editorial or an Op-ed piece. I called Jim Gogek, an editorial writer for the Union Tribune and pitched the story to his answering machine. I told him that the assault could have been prevented if the parking lot business had sufficient security in place and that parking lot continues to use the San Diego Police Department as their security force. I called back once as a reminder before Jim called me and said he wanted to run the story. I provided background information similar to above as well as some real data indicating this parking lot had over 300 police call in the last year. Additionally, I gave him contacts for key informant interviews. It became evident that the parking lot owner has a responsibility to prevent harm in their domain shifting the target of change from the individual to the business owner.

I forwarded 20 pages of documentation including police call reports, names and addresses of all the parking lot owners, information on the Binational Policy Council and its participants. A follow-up call was placed the next day to ensure all the faxed information was received and if there were any other questions. Jim Gogek informed me that he had all the information for the story and it would run on Thursday, February 15, 2001 in the South Bay Edition of the Union Tribune.

The timing is perfect due to the fact that the parking lot in question is going through a conditional use permit renewal process and this article will support our argument for enhanced public safety and security standards.

**The Story:**

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Union-Tribune Editorial

## Border parking lots islands of crime

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**February 15, 2001**

The night before New Year's Eve, a horribly violent assault occurred among drunken young men in the sprawling UETA parking lot in San Ysidro. Originally called a hate crime, it turned out to be an alcohol-fueled brawl by mostly underage kids who had been drinking all night in Tijuana. One man was beaten and kicked so badly that he's permanently disfigured.

It could have been avoided -- with better security and safety measures in the parking lot. The huge border parking lots are magnets for all kinds of crime, brought on, of course, by the fact that many people park in them to go across to Tijuana bars to get drunk.

Alcohol is the leading cause of violence in our society. It's not surprising, then, that fights break out in the parking lots when groups of young people are on their way home late at night. There are other kinds of crime in these parking lots, too -- many involving stolen vehicles. The general sense of lawlessness in the border zone creates an incubator for crime.

The San Diego Police Department and several community groups, including the Institute for Public Strategies, are trying to curb crime-and alcohol-related problems in the border parking lots. But many parking lot owners are not taking these matters seriously. They believe that public safety is a police responsibility, not their responsibility.

Not all lot owners think that way. Had last December's vicious attack begun in a parking lot across the street from UETA, Border Station Parking, it likely would have been diffused quickly. That's because owners of that 6-acre lot believe public safety is their responsibility, too. Border Station Parking has a large, uniformed staff and an armed off-duty police officer working as security on busy nights. It has surveillance cameras throughout the lot, two-way radios for employees, bicycle patrols, good visibility and a loudspeaker system to warn would-be combatants that the cops are on their way. It even has a designated driver program to help prevent drunken driving. Plus, the staff has good communication with law enforcement.

Other lots often have only one employee on duty, strictly to collect money, with no effort made to protect public safety. One lot doesn't even have a telephone to call police.

Border Station Parking's efforts have worked. San Diego police crime statistics show that in the UETA parking lot, there were 300 calls to the police last year resulting in 40 arrests. At Border Station, there were 25 calls for service and zero arrests. UETA is an 8-acre lot.

A group called the Binational Policy Council has been set up for government agencies, community groups and businesses in the border area to find solutions to these and other problems. While some parking lot owners are very involved in the community -- UETA gave \$250,000 to Casa Familiar, a San Ysidro social service agency -- they generally don't participate in the Binational Policy Council.

San Diego Police Department officials say they're not asking parking lots to make expensive changes. They say simple improvement such as better lighting, surveillance cameras and better communications with police would improve public safety. And the police department even has offered to send out experts to advise lot owners on inexpensive ways to heighten the safety of their customers.

The parking lots with the most crime problems, police say, are the ones making the least effort toward safety.

Border parking lot owners must realize that public safety isn't just a police problem. These days, throughout the nation, communities and businesses work hand-in-hand with police to reduce crime. And the results are safer communities for everybody.

In the high-crime border area, owners of the giant parking lots have a responsibility to do their part to reduce crime and violence.