

State Department Behind in Passport Issuing

By: Slade Ogletree
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As most of us now know, Passports are being required, or are to be required of all US citizens traveling between the US, Mexico (including Baja), Canada and the Caribbean. The initiative is part of a “knee-jerk” response by the US Government to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to increase border security. While few will dispute the fact that having one standardized document to identify international travelers crossing into and out of the US is far superior to having to verify any two of an estimated 8000 formerly qualifying documents, the new law has caused huge delays in processing Passport applications.



Pres. George Bush

As of January 1, 2007 Passports were required of all US citizens traveling by air between the US and Canada, the Caribbean, and Mexico. On January 1, 2008 Passports will be required for all border crossings, including those by land and sea. It is estimated that there are between 300 and 400 million border crossings each year that are affected.



Earlier this month, in an attempt to ease the backlog, The Bush Administration agreed to a 90 day (June 1-Sept 30) suspension of the new Passport Requirements called for by the initiative. This suspension applies only to applications received before June 1, 2007.

The US Congress addressed the issue of the Passport backlog this week and laid the blame for the delays directly on the US State Department and the Bush Administration. “Everyone except the Bush Administration can plainly see that a train wreck is looming on the horizon” said Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) in a statement regarding the ongoing problems.

Congressional investigators found that the department ignored warning signs of increased demand as early as November 2006 when applications were 250,000 greater than normal. By January 2007, when the requirement began to take effect for air transport only, there were 600,000 more applications than they were equipped to handle.



More than half of the Senate called directly upon Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to put an end the backlog immediately and to ensure that it does not reoccur after the temporary waiver expires. 56 Senators signed a letter to Rice saying, in part, “It is unacceptable that American citizens were missing trips because the State Department did not fully anticipate the increase in Passport applications and take appropriate action to increase processing resources”



Sen Pat Leahy

Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fla) took another tack by saying that the State Department should consider refunding the \$60 fee for “expedited processing” that some applicants paid on top of the regular \$97 fee. “How much was collected for services not rendered?” asked Nelson spokesman, Dan McLaughlin. “Who at the State Department is most responsible for inaction, given their own projections...?”

Angry taxpayers have been contacting their representatives for weeks with reports of travel plans going haywire. The wait for a Passport has grown from a leisurely 3 weeks last year to more than 3 months today. According to the State Department, at present there are more than 500,000 applications that have been on hold for over 12 weeks. The department says that they are on track to process 17 million applications this year compared to the 12 million it processed in 2006.

There is a measure recently passed by the House of Representatives that echoes language from the Senate Appropriations Committee’s pending 37 million dollar budget for Homeland Security that calls for a 17 month

delay for instituting the Passport requirement (until Jan 1, 2009) for land and sea travel, but overall it has only lukewarm support.

Even with the current wait and problems, I continue to advise anyone even thinking about coming to Baja to go ahead and start your application as soon as it is convenient. That will leave your options open. What about the wait? You're just getting ready for "mañana time!!"

If you have applied for, but not yet received your Passport, you may be able to track its progress at:

http://travel.state.gov/passport/get/status/status_2567.html

For complete information check the Passport Office official home page at:

http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html

This information is accurate as of June 25, 2007, but is subject to change without notice.