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## **U.S. border czar appointment greeted with applause, skepticism**

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times

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The U.S. border czar will give El Paso and other Southwest cities a greater voice with the Obama administration, various Texas and Mexican leaders said Wednesday.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano named Alan Bersin, 62, of San Diego, to the job. He previously was her assistant secretary for international and border affairs.

El Paso Mayor John Cook said having Bersin as a border specialist could only help.

"I am happy with the attention being placed on the border and the issues surrounding it," Cook said.

Mexican business leaders also welcomed the news because it means the border will be a priority for the U.S. government, said Jose Contreras, vice president of the Juárez National Chamber of Commerce.

"Everyone agrees that ending the flow of arms and cash to Mexico across the U.S. border will help tremendously to control the drug violence," Contreras said. "I believe Bersin will be well-received, as long as he doesn't express any negative views, such as building more border walls or sending soldiers to guard the border."

Contreras said border officials were already working on concerns that increased southbound border checks could slow legitimate commerce and generate new complaints about the crackdown on drug traffickers.

"We have asked for a comprehensive analysis of border traffic flows so the checkpoints can be set up in a safe manner and with the least interference to commerce possible," he said.

El Paso businesswoman Veronica Callaghan, vice president of the Border Trade Alliance, was among those who were invited to join Napolitano and Bersin for a private luncheon Wednesday.

"Bersin will be someone who is constantly monitoring the border, and who will have a direct line to Napolitano on these matters," Callaghan said. "It is not just about how to process the checkpoints at the international bridges faster; it is really about dealing with the human safety issues of illegal immigration and drug violence. People at the border want a sense of security and order. I am hopeful Napolitano and the new assistant secretary really mean business."

U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said he was unclear on at least some aspects of Bersin's new role.

"While I am glad the (Obama administration) is placing greater focus on and directing more resources to the challenges faced along our southern border, I am interested in learning more

about the roles and responsibilities of this new position and how this person will interact with Congress and local leaders," Cornyn said.

Not everyone thinks appointing a border czar is the answer to complaints about Mexico's drug violence.

Santiago Ibarreche, a border expert who teaches at the University of Texas at El Paso, called it "a waste of time, and that it's being done for PR purposes. I would like to know what authority he will have, and how many more human-rights violations we might see. Having so many law enforcement agencies under Homeland Security is also a big mistake."

The national Law Enforcement Officers Advocates Council issued a statement that questioned the creation of the new federal office.

"(Do) all the various leaders of the federal law enforcement agencies report to this new czar? Where does he fall in the chain of command, who does he report to, or does he report to the president. ... It's patently absurd to create this position, which raises the natural follow-up questions: What is the real agenda here and how is the position being budgeted by the Congress?"

The council, based in Chino, Calif., is a nonprofit advocacy organization for law enforcement officers. Sandalio "Sandy" Gonzalez, former chief of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso office, is the council's executive vice president.

Eight years ago, Texas state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, and U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas, petitioned President George W. Bush for a border czar but were turned down. In a resolution then, reasons for a border czar cited by Texas senators were a dramatic increase in trade related to NAFTA, strains on border roads and bridges, heavy traffic congestion, border-crossing delays and increased air and noise pollution.

The rampant drug violence that has attracted worldwide attention to the border was not an issue then as it is today.

In 2001, Mexican President Vicente Fox created a border czar position for Mexico, and named U.S.-born Gov. Ernesto Ruffel Appel to the post.

The Mexican border czar's office lost its luster and power after the U.S. government declined to create a similar post. Mexico's current president, Felipe Calderón, has yet to appoint a border czar.

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