

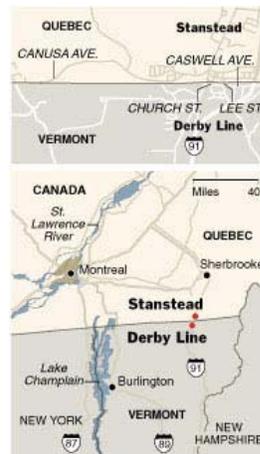
## Quebec and Vermont Towns Bond Over a Sleepy Border



Caleb Kenna for The New York Times

At the Haskell Free Library, a line on the floor marks the border between Canada and the United States. A task force proposes blocking some cross-border streets.

STANSTEAD, Quebec, July 13 — The border between Canada and the United States does not get much more undefended than where Lee Street, a sleepy residential lane, meets Caswell Avenue. Other than a simple green and white sign, nothing indicates that motorists navigating the intersection have entered the United States.



Once a symbol of cross-border friendship, Lee Street has become a source of anxiety for security officials in both the United States and Canada who have stepped up border security since Sept. 11, 2001. But a proposal by a joint border task force to block Lee and two other unguarded streets that cross between Stanstead, Quebec, and Derby Line, Vt., has, if anything, united the towns.

“If you come home and your neighbors have put up a fence, what are the first thoughts that come to your mind?” said Raymond Yates, an appliance repairman and dealer who is Stanstead’s mayor. “It gives you the wrong opinion when you see some kind of obstacle.”

Roland Roy, a Derby Line trustee and pharmacist, agreed. “We don’t want to build barriers to our neighbors,” he said. “You’re just plugging a hole in the dike, and another one will pop up.”

The movement to keep the roads open is an almost philosophical crusade in a part of the world where national boundaries can be confused and few families are without members on both sides of the border.

How confused? Mr. Yates made his case for open streets from a wicker loveseat tucked in an alcove of a 106-year-old opera house and library that the two towns share. At one point, Mr. Yates literally straddled the border, a black line under his feet marking the boundary.

About 2.5 miles away from the Haskell Free Library and Opera House runs a road with the perhaps inevitable name of Canusa Avenue. While the street itself is in Canada, the houses south of it are in the United States. Whenever Canusa’s American residents pull out of their driveways, they have left the United States and must report to a border post. Conveniently, there is one of each national variety at the corner.

Drinking water for the two towns is pumped from wells in Canada, stored in a reservoir in the United States and distributed through a system maintained by Canadians. Derby Line’s sewage makes a cross-border trip for treatment.

And until Quebec introduced government health care and a highway provided a quick link to Canadian hospitals, most people in Stanstead were born in Vermont. That has left much of the town’s middle-aged or older population, including three of Mr. Yates’s four children, dual citizens.

Even those opposed to blocking the three streets with planters or gates agree that it would have little practical effect on residents of either town. There are three official crossings between Stanstead and the United States staffed with border officials from both countries. In recent years, local residents have learned that not reporting to one of them after using an unguarded crossing can prompt a swift and sometimes unpleasant visit from the police or border officials.

Unguarded crossings, like one on Church Street, are monitored by security cameras perched atop light poles. Recently painted marks to guide coming construction work suggest that vehicle sensors lie under the pavement.

But after looking at Stanstead, the Integrated Border Enforcement Team for the region, a group of Canadian and American law enforcement and border agencies, concluded that the equivalent of an invisible dog fence was not sufficient.

“The main problem is illegal immigrants,” said Cpl. Elaine Lavergne of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who was among the officials at an open meeting at the Haskell Library in June. She acknowledged that the 100 or so people who attended did not warm to the idea of blocking the streets.

“Of course they were vocal and concerned about what we want,” Corporal Lavergne said from her office in Montreal. “They’re proud of their history. But because of what happened on Sept. 11, 2001, we cannot do nothing. We have to react when there’s a threat.”

The number of illegal immigrants captured on both sides of the border at Stanstead and Derby Line is confidential, Corporal Lavergne said, adding, “We’re not talking about thousands going through.”

The United States Border Patrol, which is also part of the team, did not respond to requests for comment.

Whatever happens, Corporal Lavergne said Canadians would still be allowed to visit the library and opera house building, which is mostly in Canada but can only be entered through the United States, without border inspections. Provided, that is, that they walk into the United States at Church Street. Any roadblocks, she said, would be “something not intrusive because they’re used to living there without any barriers, any walls, any barbed wire.”

Down at the other end of Church Street from the border, in the bed-and-breakfast that she owns, Michelle Richard was not convinced that the unguarded streets were a security threat or that blocking them would decrease illegal crossings.

Like many residents of both towns, Ms. Richard, a member of Stanstead’s council, said she assumed that most illegal immigrants made their way across the border through the nearby woods and farmland.

The two towns have been asked by the border team to form a joint citizens’ committee, a process that is so far incomplete.

But when Mr. Yates dined at Millie’s Diner just across the street from one Canadian inspection station, the other patrons voiced their opposition to any roadblocks.

Among them was the owner, Bashar Shbib. An independent filmmaker, Mr. Shbib, who was born in Damascus, Syria, sold a house in Los Angeles and an apartment in New York after Sept. 11 to return to the area where he was raised on a farm by his Syrian father and German mother.

Unlike many local residents who are visibly angered by the roadblock plan, Mr. Shbib is slightly more sanguine, saying the border tightening is ultimately doomed.

“I’m a North American,” he said. “I’ve lived in the States. I’m here in Canada. “If putting up silly little flower pots doesn’t work, what do you do next? Borders go up just before they fall.”

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