

Border Patrol takes library out of circulation

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DERBY LINE, Vt. (AP) -- Step through the front door of the Haskell Library and you're in the United States.

Walk across the carpeted floor to the circulation desk and you're in Canada. But if you sit down on the couch, you're back in the United States.

The 106-year-old Romanesque building, which straddles the international border, has enjoyed a kind of informal immunity from border restrictions through the years.

But a U.S. Border Patrol crackdown focusing on three unguarded streets linking Derby Line with Stanstead, Quebec, across the border, could soon change that.

"There's been an increase in illegal activity, both north and south, in the last little while," said Mark Henry, the operations officer for the Border Patrol's Swanton sector, which runs across northern New York, Vermont and New Hampshire.

Under the crackdown, instead of parking their cars outside the library in Quebec and walking to the front door in the United States, Canadian patrons would have to detour through one of two ports of entry linking the municipalities.

Some people are leery about the change.

"For as long as I've lived here, the practice was if they were only going to the library, they didn't have to report," said village trustee Keith Beadle, who also sits on the library board.

If the streets are closed, smugglers will just walk across lawns or through the woods, Mr. Beadle said.

No decisions have been made, but U.S. and Canadian authorities are holding a series of meetings with officials from both communities.

"This all fits in to the larger picture of the Border Patrol strategy to gain operational control of our borders," Mr. Henry said.

Cpl. Luc Bessette, a spokesman for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, said: "I don't think they're aiming at people who go pick up groceries and come back. It's people that want to use this in a bad way."

Smugglers have learned the side streets are unguarded, and although surveillance cameras monitor activity on other streets, border agents on both sides can't always get there in time when illegal activity is spotted.

Recently, two vans carrying 21 illegal aliens were caught in the United States after having crossed over on one of the unguarded streets.

Even though Derby Line and Stanstead are separate municipalities, they share water and sewer systems and emergency crews, which respond to calls on both sides of the border.

In the town of Beebe Plain, about three miles west of Derby Line, the border runs down the middle of Canusa Avenue, a residential street.

Houses on the south side fly American flags and cars with green Vermont license plates sit in the driveways. Across the street, a sign says "Arret" (French for "stop") and

cars have white Quebec plates.

Pat Boisvert, 66, who has lived in the same house -- on the Vermont side -- his whole life, said residents never used to notice the border.

"It was like it wasn't even there, especially for people who lived around here," he said.