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TRAVEL BUG; Jumping the Security Line (or Not)

By JOE SHARKEY

THE entrepreneur Steven Brill estimated in Congressional testimony in late 2005 that the Registered Traveler program, in which members pay about \$100 a year to receive a biometric I.D. card and to use a special lane to get through airport security with less bother, would be operating at 30 to 40 big airports in six months.

In March, he said in an interview that the program would have as many as 400,000 members by the end of 2007. In an interview during the summer, he said his company's version of the program, called Clear, would have 100,000 members by the fall.

Hasn't happened.

Clear, the major operator of Registered Traveler, which was mandated by Congress to be operated by private enterprise, now has about 65,000 enrolled members. Competitors, among them Unisys and a partnership called FLO (for Fast Lane Option) Alliance, have said they're entering the business, and a Unisys program is now operating at one airport, in Reno, Nev.

Is the Registered Traveler program dead in the water?

No way, says the indefatigable Mr. Brill, whose past business ventures include founding Court TV and American Lawyer magazine. He has long been interested in security issues and is the author of "After: How America Confronted the Sept. 12 Era." His company, Verified Identity Pass Inc., now operates in 10 airports, including Kennedy in New York, Newark Liberty International and San Francisco, with others planned soon.

Mr. Brill points out that his ambitious enrollment projections were always predicated on the assumption that the program would be able to offer technology-based benefits in addition to a special lane. Clear's big technology initiative so far has been a shoe-scanner machine, developed in partnership with General Electric, one of Mr. Brill's investors, that would allow members to clear security without taking their shoes off.

But the Transportation Security Administration still hasn't given a green light to the machine after a year of testing. Tests were continuing last week, the T.S.A. said.

In testimony in July, Mr. Brill sounded exasperated by the delay and suggested that the agency doesn't really support the program. "Rather, the agency has allowed the program to happen grudgingly, behind schedule and only then because, frankly, you in Congress and we as entrepreneurs have pushed it," he said.

Mr. Brill said later that he was deliberately being blunt to create some political pressure on the T.S.A.

Kip Hawley, the director of the T.S.A., said last week that testing of the machine was almost complete.

"It's in the lab now, and they're almost done," he said. "If it comes out good, we'll all be happy. If it's not good, we'll have to go back to G.E. and see if they want to refine it, and that will be complicated."

Whatever comes of the shoe scanner and later technology that might, for example, allow passengers to pass security without removing coats or laptops, Mr. Brill says Clear's business plan was always built partly on providing other customer-service benefits.

At Indianapolis, Clear now has two concierges who help members get their possessions onto the security belt (as they do at other Clear lanes), but who also are stationed inside the security zone to help members collect belongings.

"Our customers love it," Mr. Brill said.

The business, Mr. Brill said, is a "long haul" proposition based primarily on the value of verified biometric identity, which itself will drive a wide customer base.

Mr. Brill's competitors echo the customer-service theme. Among the ideas they've discussed are adding priority parking and other benefits to memberships.

"One piece of technology, while we have a ton of confidence in it, is not the business," Mr. Brill said of the uncertain fate of the shoe scanner.

BIOMETRIC I.D. cards, and the expanding number of people who carry them, are crucial to long-range expansion plans, he added.

"In the post-9/11 world there are going to be additional security bottlenecks" besides airports, perhaps at train and bus stations and even sports arenas and shopping malls, Mr. Brill said. "If I want to pay somebody \$100 a year to get a verified credential that says I'm probably a little safer than the guy who doesn't have the credential, and they can give me some kind of different process at a security bottleneck, I'll pay for that."