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Short trip, big purpose

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As trade missions go, the one planned by the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for June 22-26 will be short and tiny.

Only six people will travel — four board members and two staffers. No immediate business deals are likely to be struck. But the delegation could come back with some mighty valuable information.

What other potential new market than Cuba could open someday so close to Texas with a population of more than 11 million people?

Under the five-decade-old U.S. trade embargo, the only products U.S. companies can sell to Cuba now are agricultural and medical. The chamber delegation intends to learn about the opportunities and demand in those sectors, plus the technicalities of how to make sales.

The chamber delegation also hopes to develop contacts so that when the U.S. trade embargo ends and U.S. companies can join the rest of the world in conducting commerce with the island nation, San Antonio firms can respond quickly.

The chamber is limited to sending only a few board members and staffers by the rare license it received for the trade mission from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

"It's a controlled license. Few people get these," chamber CEO and President Ramiro

Cavazos said.

Along with Cavazos, the delegation will be comprised of board Chairwoman Patricia Pliego Stout, ex-chairman Ben Rodriguez, board members Robert McKinley and John Gonzalez, and the chamber's chief of staff, José María González.

The delegation can't visit Cuban companies directly. The San Antonians instead will confer with the Cuban chamber of commerce, the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the health and agriculture departments, José María González said.

Of the six people, perhaps the key Cuba visitor will be McKinley, who heads the University of Texas at San Antonio's Institute for Economic Development.

McKinley hopes the information he obtains on the trade mission on Cuba's market demand and the technical path for doing business will help make the UTSA institute the go-to place for companies wanting to trade food and medical supplies with Cuba.

The institute already has an electronic trading system in place, too, that could help someday.

Caribbean islands typically can export products like sugarcane. "But they have to buy so many other things. You have to drill down to see what the demand is and what they are willing to spend money on," McKinley said.

The UTSA institute can play another role, too.

The institute's International Trade Center has established numerous small business development centers, similar to the one the institute operates for South Texas, in many foreign nations, including islands near Cuba such as the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Barbados and Dominica.

When the U.S. trade embargo ends, large corporations will jump into Cuba seeking market share, but Cuba will want to protect its small businesses "from being crushed," McKinley said. UTSA-trained SBDCs could be an effective way to do that. Probably no other city can help Cuba that way.

"We see ourselves (the chamber) as a conduit of small business to business opportunities," said John Gonzalez of JDG Associates Inc., chairman of the chamber's business and economic development committee.

The Cuba trade mission "gives us a head start" to the day when U.S. companies can trade freely with Cuba, he added.

"Many parts of the world conduct business with Cuba. We understand the culture. We speak the language. I want to see the global view of what Cuba is today. We have to take the opportunity to see a Cuba that might be open in the near future," Stout said.

"We'll leave our footprints there," she added.