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OUR VIEW: Why Douglas Port of Entry matters

It's not hard to find news of a difficult economy in Cochise County. While Tucson celebrates the opening of Caterpillar's new headquarters and national surveys report the city needs another 7,000 workers to fill its growing employment needs, Cochise County is reporting job losses, store closings and a declining population.

Talk to veteran community members who have "seen this trend before" and it reflects our reality as a government town tied to the fortunes of Fort Huachuca. At our zenith a decade ago we were building more than 600 homes a year in Sierra Vista and economic prospects were bright. We're not feeling that momentum today after sequestration, force reductions and contractor cuts have slowed our local economy and forced government and community leaders to ponder what can be done.

One opportunity hanging low on the economic fruit tree is the Douglas Port of Entry. If Cochise County can get on the same page with the City of Douglas in petitioning for a solution that will build a modern facility on the international border, the economic impact could be huge.

Douglas has asked the federal government three separate times to fund construction of this project, pleading with Customs and Border Protection officials to build the facility for the benefit of the community. The most recent effort offered to sweeten the deal with free land and utility hook-ups.

After three denials, it's time to change the strategy.

Building a new Port of Entry in Douglas should be both economically feasible for the business community, and a significant improvement in our border security for our federal government. The hard lesson Douglas must learn — as Sierra Vista and other government-dependent communities already know — is a cold reality that benefiting the community is the last concern on the checklist of priorities for the federal government.

This deal has to pay for itself with an economic incentive that attracts transport businesses, Mexican shoppers going north and American shoppers going south, and others willing to invest with the intention of gathering a financial return.

When the economic argument can be made and there is less dependence on federal funding for the project, then CBP and other federal agencies will get serious about planning a new Port of Entry in Douglas.

Look no further than Nogales for a nearby example of the economic impact that a successful Port of Entry has on a community. While Douglas handles about 27,000 trucks a year, Mariposa

is the port for some 308,000, carrying about \$3.3 billion in agriculture produce each year. Mariposa is the crossing point for 3.2 million northbound Mexicans, with Douglas about 2.4 million. In addition to more employment, these businesses need storage facilities and other infrastructure necessary to be competitive in their respective businesses.

Mariposa benefits from a network of highways, connecting the Port of Entry to northbound routes all the way to Canada. Douglas offers a faster way for commercial traffic to reach Interstate I-10, heading east; and faster access to rail service.

Our economic challenges are regional, but end at the Pima County line. It's past time Cochise County, Douglas, U.S. Rep. McSally and our state lawmakers take a serious interest in this project.