

On the Borderline

The economies of Douglas, Sierra Vista and Nogales

Just how deep is the valley separating economic success and stagnation? Three key Arizona border towns are about to find out. In order to attract and retain residents, Douglas, Sierra Vista and Nogales equip themselves with a strategic plan for economic diversity and begin a relatively steep trek toward a new ridgeline.

Although close in proximity and clustered just north of the Mexico border, they are far apart when it comes to community identity because of the highly contrasting industries fueling their economic engines. In an effort to be less dependent on a single employer or industry, they look for ways to variegate business development.

During the peak season, about 40 percent of produce comes through the Nogales port of entry: 2,000 trucks cross into U.S. territory each day, sometimes waiting up to 48 hours at the border. "It's almost impossible for that port to expand to accommodate this activity," says Gonzalez.

Although there's only a short 60 miles between Douglas and Sierra Vista, there's far more than distance separating them.

Aerospace and high-tech industries dominate Sierra Vista. With more than 110,000 people living within a 25-mile radius, there are more people with master's degrees and doctorates in Sierra Vista than any other city or town in Arizona, according to research done by the University of Arizona. Within city limits, Fort Huachuca, the largest employer in Southern Arizona, has attracted companies like Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics C4 Systems, Boeing and Northrop Grumman Integrated Systems, accounting for more than 4,000 civilian jobs. The military base is undoubtedly the linchpin of Sierra Vista's economy; without it, there would be minimal employment opportunities to sustain its economy.

But Barry Albrecht is working on changing this. As CEO of nonprofit Sierra Vista Economic Development Foundation, Albrecht aims to diversify the economy, making Sierra Vista less dependent on Fort Huachuca and less susceptible to military cutbacks.

"We want a quality community with a diverse salary range. Yes, we have minimum wage and high wage, but nothing in between," says Albrecht.

The foundation generated more than \$1 million last year alone for economic development programs. By offering incentives for redevelopment projects and attracting Aegis Communications in 1999 (a major call center with an annual payroll of \$12 million), it's closer to its goal: establish Sierra Vista as the primary hub for retail and service in Southeastern Arizona. **AB**

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