Board backs plan for Economic Development District

As the Yuma County Board of Supervisors took a look at its future economic development strategy Monday, it voted in favor of a resolution to form an economic development district – something that should have been done by the federal government 21 years ago.

The Western Arizona Economic Development District has had contingent approval since then and helped financed a few projects in the counties it serves: Yuma, La Paz and Mohave.

"It was obviously there. I've been a member of it for a long time," Board Chair Tony Reyes said. He was first elected as a county supervisor the same year.

But the paperwork creating a board of directors for the board apparently never made it into the U.S. Economic Development Administration's records, officials said.

Alan Pruitt, who's been executive director for the district since 2009, said the EDA's regional office, "in what they're gently calling a 'filing mishap' in Seattle, resulted in them noticing last year that poof, we did not exist as a district," at least with permanent status.

This means it's been eligible for one-year grants for local projects, but not for three- to five-year grants which can help with larger projects and regional long-term planning, Pruitt said.
Getting permanent status would make more more federally-funded tools available.

The only way to fix that is to re-create the work done back in 1998: fill out a bunch more forms, have the three county boards of supervisors pass resolutions asking Gov. Doug Ducey to make the formal request to the EDA, with support from educational, workforce development and other agencies.

Pruitt said the result will be more tools at the Western Arizona district’s disposal, such as a revolving loan fund for gas financing to local businesses.

Projects in the three counties which have gotten a boost from the district include the Joe Foss Hangar at Yuma International Airport.

Economic development districts across the country get federal funding from program supporting job growth by expanding infrastructure, economic integration, innovation strategies and other means. They also help with long-term disaster recovery.

Pruitt said he hopes the district will get its full status by the beginning of the next federal fiscal year, on October 1.

The board also reviewed an outline for an economic development strategy for the county, which ranks the EDA as the likeliest source of funding to boost its priorities.

The outline, presented by Paul Melcher, economic development and intergovernmental affairs director, includes:

- A list of prioritized industries topped by advanced manufacturing, food processing and aerospace.

- Incentives for new employers such as reimbursement for training and infrastructure costs.
• Emphasis on the Foothills and its "burgeoning downtown commercial district."

• Strengthening the core industries of agriculture, the military and tourism.

• Developing more broadband, transportation and other infrastructure.

• Cross-border collaboration with partners in Mexico, including the 4 Borders Educational Alliance and Organismo Promotor del Desarrollo Economico de San Luis Rio Colorado Mexicali.

"We don't do anything in a vacuum here in Yuma County. We rely on our collaborative efforts to move forward and get things done as a region, and that's where we've taken that regional emphasis and expanded that to an international emphasis as well," he said.

Melcher said the plan will be developed throughout the rest of this year, beginning with stakeholder meetings from May through July.

Reyes said he's always wondered why the county hasn't taken a more active role in regional efforts to attract more employers to the county, which has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country.

"And I think that within the next few months or maybe within the next few years, we will become a very integral part of that process," he said. "It's always been a surprise to me to see what's going on at the region and have the county not be a part of that process.

Also Monday, the board:

• Auctioned off a 5,300 square-foot excess parcel at the southeast corner of 8th Street and Eleanor Avenue for $11,800.
• Recommended state liquor board approval for a Series 6 liquor license for Bertram Beaulieu, Basque Etchea Restaurant, 8575 Ave. 40E, Tacna.

• Held a closed executive session to go over County Administrator Susan Thorpe's annual job performance review.