



# Strengthening Our Global Value through Regional Collaboration

FINAL REPORT



Southwest Arizona Futures Forum



## **Southwest Arizona Futures Forum**

**19th Plenary Session:**

### **“Strengthening Our Global Value Through Regional Collaboration”**

### **Final Report**

**November 3, 2016 7:30a.m. - 4:00p.m. Yuma Main Library**

#### **Introduction**

On November 3, 2016, nearly 100 community and student leaders from Yuma County met together in a Southwest Arizona Futures Forum Plenary Session to learn about, discuss and make recommendations regarding the topic, Strengthening Our Global Value Through Regional Collaboration.

Those gathered heard informative presentations from a distinguished panel of experts and then separated into six breakout groups each led by a Chairperson and a Panel Recorder. Using information gleaned from a research document furnished to each participant, the knowledge gained from the speaker’s panel, and the background each participant brought to the table, the six groups then addressed a series of nine questions designed to elicit consensus statements and recommendations regarding the topic. The Panel Recorders skillfully drafted consensus statements from each panel, which were forwarded in real time to a Report Committee. The Report Committee, working rapidly throughout the day, collated and edited the multi panel statements into a cohesive report of the consensus of the Plenary. This is the Final Report of the 19th Plenary of the Southwest Arizona Futures Forum.

***Global and Regional Impact/Trade: The strategic values and strengths of the southwest region, threats to trade growth and opportunities, and the opportunities to increase trade and global value in collaboration with the region.***

Trade is essential for economic development and employment on both sides of the border. In this geographic area, trade encompasses not just business transactions across states and borders, but also on-the-ground logistics to facilitate the movement of raw materials, goods, and labor.

Regional strategic values and strengths in trade include geography, the positive relationship with Mexico, the culture of support for improving education to build a future skilled workforce, and established major industries.

The Yuma area benefits from its geographical location as a gateway to the west coast with proximity to California and Mexico. The area is a port of entry from Mexico and is located within a reasonable distance of several major hubs of business and commerce. The climate of the area also attracts winter visitors, military installations, and other industrial testing that all benefit the region's economy.

The relationship between Yuma County and Mexico is characterized by a history and culture of collaboration. Ongoing cooperation between mayors on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border makes for a respectful relationship. The area's multiculturalism, with a large Latino/Hispanic population, is advantageous for trade and relations with Mexico. Trust and communication are vital for sustaining relationships between governments, businesses and tribal groups on both sides of the border. External barriers, however, challenge the strength of this relationship, such as trade tariffs and quotas. An improvement in relationships between leaders in Yuma County and Mexico could help this region to send stronger and clearer messages to Washington. Improved international integration with Canada, especially given the large numbers of Canadians that visit the area each year, will also strengthen the area's global impact. These transnational relationships provide a strong foundation for trade but are also an area for further growth.

Transnational relationships are built on cultural understanding and the flow of labor. This is why education is key to sustaining the economic development of the region. There is active support for growth in Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM), and schools are working with businesses to identify skills needed for future job growth. Technological advancement in water and agriculture will bring high-skilled growth to the area and can promote synergy with other industries. As the world's winter lettuce capital, we need technological advancements to overcome the uncertain future of water rights and bring strategic value to the area. The area's quality workforce and low-cost but high quality of life, helps attract ex-military personnel back to the area for employment opportunities.

Major employers such as Yuma Regional Medical Center (YRMC) and the military are also local assets that can provide the foundation for further growth. Yuma's military presence could draw regional manufacturing companies in areas such as

equipment. Agriculture is also a huge industry in the area, and broadening agriculture to include commerce would strengthen the region's trade.

Threats to our trade growth and opportunities include natural resource limitations, challenges in communication, and legislative/political barriers. Natural resources sustain the area's growth, but the uncertainty of water availability and unpredictability of future water rights is a threat to development. The cost of land is also a threat, with additional constraints to San Luis, AZ by virtue of being "landlocked" by government land. The loss of farmland to housing development is also a threat.

Communication infrastructure is also a threat, with the need for improvements both physical (roads) and IT (internet, cell phone coverage). Communication also includes the need for an expedited border process for trucks. Communication challenges also exist within Yuma County, between South County and Yuma proper. There is a need for stronger relationships and better communication within Yuma County to work with each other and collectively see the value of the area's proximity to Mexico. Better business communication with Mexico would improve perceptions of safety and good business on both sides of the border.

The image of the area can also be a threat. In Mexico, Arizona legislation such as SB1070 has harmed business perceptions of the Southwest. The area could also be more proactive with messaging to reach a broader national and international audience. The Borderplex Alliance in Texas is a good example of international collaboration and cohesive messaging. Some have seen parochialism in our self-image. There is potential to view the region more in interstate and international perspective, an interconnected rather than a siloed region. More collaboration between the U.S. and Mexico would give the area a stronger voice in conveying the challenges of state and federal regulations to trade.

Indeed, governmental regulations inhibit free trade across borders. A more open border between the U.S. and Mexico would foster the growth of commerce, manufacturing, and employment in the U.S. Simultaneously, there is a need for partnerships that withstand political change, and for forward-looking, creative political leaders that support positive changes.

Opportunities in the area relate to our existing strengths in agriculture and our geographical position. There is also potential to build industry to support supply chains that provide value to industrial clusters that are close by (aerospace, medicine, automotive). We must continue to look beyond Mexico and Canada to build and promote the agricultural and industrial sectors, and attract workforce from other parts of the globe to fill workforce needs in this area. The large population in Sonora provides a potential workforce for more industrial development.

Improvements to infrastructure and the border crossing systems can drive growth in the area. This could include capitalizing on the highway connecting Mexicali with Yuma Proving Ground (YPG) and the Yuma International Airport, to improve the flow of



goods and labor. As a border area, there is potential to form an international crossing area connecting two countries and four states.

Further collaboration is critical to building our global and regional impact, and our strength in trade. Municipalities, organizations, and businesses within Yuma County must cooperate internally to promote and brand the area as a collaborative modern region. At a larger scale, both the U.S. and Mexico must collaborate to minimize border crossing time to facilitate transnational collaboration and trade. 4FrontED has been established as a local body for collaboration, with four pillars: tourism, economic development, education, and transportation/infrastructure. Additional regional and mega organizations serving as umbrellas could further develop collaborations and investment opportunities. This could take the form of collaborating with other border communities in Arizona and other organizations in trade and tourism to holistically promote the quality of life, job creation opportunities, and investment potential of the region.

***Transportation and Infrastructure: The strengths and assets of the region, the threats to expansion, and the required planning, investment and regional collaboration to expand***

Transportation and infrastructure are critical elements of any attempt to create a functional business environment, particularly for cross-border transactions. Several agencies and governments contribute to the planning and infrastructure required for regional movement of both people and goods.

The Southwest region has several strengths and assets particular to its regional transportation and infrastructure. At its most elemental, trade takes place when communities look to utilize an advantage to gain access to those resources and goods in which it is disadvantaged, and when there is a strategic value to engaging with a neighbor. One of the obvious unique strength of the Southwest region is its proximity to Mexico, and the relationships that have developed over the years with its industries, government, and people. Within the communities of the region, regular collaboration across physical and cultural borders addresses shared issues and provides workable solutions. This collaborative approach has bred a respect for different cultures, and has allowed communities of different background to flourish in partnership with one another.

Additionally, the geographic location provides access to natural resources, lower cost living expenses at a high quality of living, and attractive weather. These resources have underpinned the development of a vibrant and critically important agricultural industry, which serves not only the region but the nation. While agriculture is the predominant industry in the region, others are locating and exploring the area due to its strengths: affordable land, regional stability and its proximity to the major markets of Southern California and Phoenix.

These underlying assets have been developed by the community leaders of the region and have attracted attention at the national level. Obviously, access to the

international border between the U.S. and Mexico receives much of the funding and planning dedicated by local and national governments. Border crossing is available in multiple areas, and certain locations—such as San Luis II, the most technologically advanced on the border—have seen increases in traffic numbers as much as 10x previous volumes. Further, the Yuma International Airport and its capabilities provide an additional and critical access point to the region. The I-8 corridor also provides important connectivity to the national interstate system. At the local level, limited internet connectivity is ubiquitous, and cities like San Luis are extending city services, like sewer, to provide additional connectivity for new developments. All in all, over \$200 million in trade and infrastructure initiatives have been developed and are available.

However, to some degree the development of the regional transportation and infrastructure system is still nascent. There is a recognizable struggle between local issues and perspective in contrast with national objectives and oversight. Historically, there has been, at times, an out-sized focus on perceived negative aspects, such as the extreme summer heat and the belief that Yuma is a small town instead of a larger, thriving metropolitan area. This results in policies that are often top-down that do not effectively take into consideration local points-of-view, creating policies and priorities that lack the insight of key stakeholders that must function within the environment created.

There has been progress with these concerns, both in concrete actions taken and in identifying those areas that must be addressed. For example, the federal government recognizes the Yuma Metropolitan Planning Organization (YMPO), which actively collaborates with other municipal and state agencies, and which is integrated with other objectives of 4FrontED—the “boots on the ground” collaborating and working with communities to get things done. But being a “rural” community limits available funding compared to large metropolitan cities. The lack of highway maintenance detracts from usage. Many are concerned that current planning on the part of cities is insufficient, and that “politics” gets in the way of what must be accomplished. Focus at the state and national level are often on other concerns, like the I-11 construction rather than expansion or development projects of existing Southwest regional corridors.

There are other specific threats to transportation infrastructure that have slowed growth. For example, the limited availability of flights from the airport is leading to the departure of some high profile professionals and their families. The high water table in certain areas affects what can be built upon the ground. Farmers of the area have had limited involvement in city planning, yet their input is critical since the industry is the backbone of the region. More collaboration amongst these stakeholders with the municipal and regional governing and planning authorities is needed to accomplish shared objectives. Without the buy-in of those affected, regulations quickly become burdensome, poorly planned and executed. Furthermore, the power infrastructure in Yuma County lags behind required parameters for expansion.

To address these concerns, it is critical that the communities of the region work together to create a common block of interests. In addition to creating a joint intelligent and informed voice, other prescient efforts—such as the creation of a railroad tie and utility corridor between Yuma and San Luis—will provide the basis for future expansion and infrastructure. These ties may also help overcome other potential roadblocks, such as the growing cost of land or federal and state land initiatives harmful to the local community. For example, San Luis is currently landlocked by government-owned land, and steps must be taken to avoid “dead zones” of development. Additionally, threats to the region’s water stability may destabilize growth and disrupt current industries.

These limitations and uncertainties reduce the financing and capital available to the region. Investment is further hampered by the limited view of what the community is. By focusing more on the bi-national and interstate nature of the region—including Arizona, California, Sonora, and Baja California—there is potential to overcome the limited view of the region. This holds true even for the community itself, which must reorient its thinking to perceive itself less as silos and more as members of a larger, interconnected region. As a region, each community’s individual strengths combined together to a greater whole, which only can serve to benefit all of the integrated communities. Local leader involvement between mayors can accomplish infrastructure gains—such as rail systems, the expansion of Highway 95 and connectivity with I-10, and border logistics—that mutually serve economic development and attracting industry that supports growth on both sides of the border.

Many of these potential joint initiatives have already been developed or identified. The border master plan has been created, but in order for that strength to be effective, it must be fully funded. Additionally, while Nogales has received a lot of development and attention, the Southwest region has not had equal priority. Logistical opportunities exist and could be expanded for customs clearance and border crossing flow in collaboration with private and governmental entities, which would speed up processing and reduce the bureaucracy of cross-border shipments, particularly agricultural and medical. The CanaMex corridor needs official designation so that it can receive federal funding and development; however, a strong lobby is needed to inform federal officials of the advantages of a Southwest portal so that the economic advantages of the border trade does not shift entirely to Phoenix. There is a border master plan done by ADOT to identify the routes from Mexico to the U.S., and the Southwest region must have a louder voice within these plans.

The current lack of cohesive action by the region is a threat to the growth of the region. To overcome this deficit and move forward, communities must think creatively, modifying those policies and procedures that prevented collaboration in the past to avoid the status quo. By taking advantage of the work begun by the YMPO, consensus can be reached at the local level of the short- and long-term priorities to create a master plan. This must include investments in the four pillars identified by 4FrontED—tourism, economic development, education and transportation/infrastructure. Cities on both sides

of the border are already collaborating on tourism and educational exchanges, and, in the process, they are learning more about each other. It is important to be a good partner and maintain positive relationships, because at its most fundamental, people have an impact on global trade.

***Health Services and Medical Tourism: Areas of expansion and exchange, drawbacks to development, opportunities for growth, and regional collaboration***

Medical tourism into Mexico and easy access from Yuma are huge draws to visitors from across the U.S. and Canada. With Yuma County's growing population, as well as growth in demands on the healthcare sector with Medicaid expansion and the Affordable Care Act, Yuma County's healthcare providers are critical to quality of life. Healthcare providers are also major employers for workers at all skill and education levels.

With the annual influx of winter visitors to the area, both American and Canadian, there is a large consumer base for expanded health services and medical tourism on both sides of the border. Dental and vision services are particularly popular for medical tourism in Mexico, and YRMC is positioning itself to better serve winter visitors from Canada.

Increased transnational coordination and communication offer opportunities to expand health services and medical tourism, and the exchange of these. For instance, bi-national insurance could play a key role in helping both healthcare consumers and providers cross the border. Healthcare providers are actively working to better collaborate with insurance carriers that cover both sides of the border. Doctors, however, must be persuaded to accept the contract fee of those carriers. There must be incentives in insurance fee schedules for doctors on both sides of the border to sign transnational carrier contracts. As with other sectors, coordinated marketing and information exchange will facilitate transnationally cooperative health services.

Greater transnational cooperation calls for more coordination of healthcare personnel. This could include international medical training and accreditation, as well as shared staffing at facilities on both sides of the border for bilingual medical professionals. Transnational cooperation could also take the form of a regional health cluster, with cooperation not just between healthcare providers but also between ancillary businesses such as hotels.

Positive patient experiences attract return winter visitors as well as professionals in all sectors to the Southwest Arizona area. Healthcare providers and navigator organizations can compile informational resources on which medical services are available at which locations on both sides of the border. This measure would improve the experience of medical tourists, long-term visitors, and even area residents.

Accessing medical services across the border is impeded by long lines. Infrastructure improvements to shorten lines and waiting times would improve the



consumer experience of medical tourists. Another measure is increasing the provision of cross-border medical transportation, some of which is already offered to winter visitors who travel to Los Algodones.

Insurance coverage influences the healthcare choices of many consumers. A coordinated, formalized system of health service and health insurance information would help area residents and visitors alike to navigate and understand their options. This could have the added benefit of reducing out-of-pocket healthcare costs. Specialty medical services are also an area for potential expansion on both sides of the border, and would enrich communities with highly skilled professionals. Yuma residents would particularly benefit from being able to access more specialty services at YRMC, rather than traveling to Phoenix.

Beyond growth in the healthcare sector itself, there is potential for new developments in the area in overlapping sectors, such as medical device manufacturing and research.

Drawbacks or negative impacts that could develop through expansion of regional health services and medical tourism include challenges relating to transnational competition in attracting healthcare consumers, with the fear of U.S. healthcare dollars being diverted to Mexico. Furthermore, differing regulations of prescription drugs in the U.S. and Mexico can cause U.S. pharmacies to lose business to Mexico. Consumers must also have access to potential drawbacks of accessing low-cost medical services in Mexico, such as differences in safety and quality.

The structure of the health insurance industry also presents barriers. Disparities in insurance availability for part-time residents of the Yuma area affect the potential for visitors from other states and countries to utilize Yuma's healthcare resources.

Medical records present some of the greatest challenges and greatest opportunities in health services and medical tourism. Healthcare partners must pursue technologies and systems to share medical and information safely, securely, and in compliance with HIPPA regulations. Such cross-border information sharing among providers is fundamental to developing an effective, consumer-friendly transnational healthcare system. The Regional Center for Border Health has already pursued a system of shared medical records between providers in the U.S. and Mexico with their CAPAZ-MEX program.

Indeed, such electronic information-sharing, as well as common clinical guidelines, could form the foundation for the development of a regional healthcare cluster that capitalizes on the strengths and existing facilities in the area, such as YRMC's Cancer Center and residency program, and the concentration of Spanish-speaking medical staff in the area. Such a regional and international consortium could encompass facilities and staff in San Luis, Arizona, San Luis Rio Colorado, Algodones, Somerton, Yuma, and possibly also Mexicali. A regional network could also help Yuma to overcome its health professional shortage.

Other potential areas to expand regional and global collaboration include telemedicine, which expands access to healthcare with little to no travel, facilitating communication with and among physicians. Telemedicine may also help to resolve the challenges that residents in outlying parts of Yuma County face with access to care. Traveling medical care offered from a mobile station, such as that offered by Sunset Community Health Clinic, could also be expanded to better serve outlying areas. Additionally, Yuma has the potential to build collaborative relationships with universities to promote health careers and attract staff, and build YRMC's residency program. For Yuma to become a destination for cost-effective generalized healthcare in Mexico and specialized care in the U.S., greater regional and global collaboration is needed. To foster these changes, Yuma must continue to improve the quality of life to attract professionals that want to live and work in Yuma for the long term.

***Education: Strengths in the current system, current limits on expansion, opportunities for change, and cross-border collaborations***

As previously identified in this report, education is a pivotal pillar of the development of the attractiveness of the region. The region has much strength in its educational community, but it is not without drawbacks.

Yuma County has been an innovator in regional collaboration for education for many years. Yuma attracted Northern Arizona University–Yuma Branch Campus, which has been present in Yuma for over 25 years. Arizona Western College is the only community college in the state with all three state university offering face-to-face classes on their Yuma campus. The parents of this area realize the importance of education for their future and encourage their children to study. The Gowan School, with collaboration between Gowan and the Crane School District as a public/private partnership, provides a higher science, reading, mathematics, and writing background for students and has achieved high Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics testing scores. The San Luis area is one of the highest achievement areas in the state, sending students to the Johns Hopkins summer seminars due to their focus on early mathematics learning at Arizona Western College.

There are already strong partnerships and initiatives in place that have created a burgeoning educational environment. For example, the Arizona Western College has provided the bricks-and-mortar location for partnership with the University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University, which provide locally-obtainable four-year bachelor's degrees, including agriculture, as well as masters and doctoral programs, including an MBA. The K-12 system is very progressive, as reflected in top honors at the state level for test scores, the numbers of students taking Advanced Placement courses or dual enrollment, the reduction in drop-out rate, and increased college matriculation. Public and private partnerships and collaborations with the schools and colleges have led to increased scholarship and off-site campuses to increase access for first-generation

students and non-traditional students. Programs such as JTED, First Things First, and the Helios Foundation have greatly contributed to advancing the educational environment.

New programs are regularly being developed in collaboration with the state universities and programs from neighboring states and countries. The programs are reaching a point of marketability even beyond the Yuma area, as they are highly regarded and have a hands-on learning experience not available at other, larger schools. This is particularly true for the development of vocational programs under JTED, providing technical education to build a sophisticated workforce. Additionally, degrees that individuals have obtained from other countries can now be validated in the United States, and local schools partner with residents of neighboring states and Mexico to share tuition waivers, in-state tuition rates, and resources. This provides critical access to education by Spanish-speaking populations, many of which are cross-border, first-generation students, that will return crucial benefits to their communities, not to mention bolster the community as a whole with a bi-lingual, educated citizenry.

However, these positive forward movements face challenges that threaten future development and expansion. There is a perennial funding problem despite the long-term benefits. This region is often not the priority of funding sources like the Arizona State Legislature. Currently, state funding and sub-regional funding alone is inadequate at the entry level of education. Legislative efforts to put money into state education funds, as approved by the voters, are not being applied to the district budgets. Instead, money is being diverted to cover state priorities other than education. The cost of higher education and the shrinking availability of loans and grants also restrict access to educational programs. Ironically, while scholarships are available, there often are not enough—or any—applicants. Further, there are many regulations within the educational system, with differences between the public schools and the charter schools. Differences in the educational systems between regional programs also can impede credit transfers. There can be difficulties in moving between schools due to these requirements.

Also, though opportunities have increased in recent years, there still is not the breadth of program availability that is found at larger metropolitan institutions. Further, there is not yet the comprehensive industry in place to employ the graduates, leading to a brain-drain in the community. Companies do not yet know the quality of the workforce available, and business should be drawn into the educational community to be made aware of its capabilities in producing a top-notch workforce. The rapid expansion of online education threatens the continued growth of the local brick-and-mortar institutions, as does the lack of qualified teachers with Masters and Ph.D. degrees.

Further, one of the region's greatest strengths—bilingualism—is not encouraged in education, as governmental restrictions prohibit Spanish-language instruction. This philosophy is outdated, as learning different languages and cultures is a proven accelerator in education. As a border state, this needs to be corrected.

There are still tremendous opportunities for growth within education. Local programs should focus on their strengths in this environment, crafting a curriculum that

reflects the needs of the region. The success of the JTED program exemplifies this approach. Comprehensive standards and development planning is being coordinated between 13 universities to collaborate on offerings, reducing duplications and making it easier for students to take classes and get degrees from multiple schools.

Additional resources must be used to reduce overcrowding at the K-12 levels. Large numbers of students from Mexico legally cross the border each day to attend school, and state allocations of resources do not adequately meet the needs of this regional community. Comprehensive education funding reform is needed to put more money directly in classrooms. Further, public and private collaboration for early childhood development in order to better fund early start programs increase participating children and long-term education success, which ultimately provides a boon for the private sector.

Overall, continuing to create face-to-face educational options enhances the opportunities for the region. Expanding WUI, tuition waiver and good neighbor policies and increasing those programs for California and Mexico gains goodwill and access to talent while promoting higher education in the region. Creative approaches such as JTED's allowing students to pay tuition through technical training on-site and programs such as the Youth Futures Forum provide enhanced access to resources for students.

Critically, the education system needs to be included in the economic development plan to ensure that they work in tandem with each other. Ideally, the plan would grow a work force that is capable and compatible with the growth of regional companies and companies the local region is targeting, as well. Collaboration between the two provides a synchronized effort beneficial to both. Further, exposing students at earlier ages to career paths available within the areas identified as critical to local economic development and the in the areas that are viable career paths for sustained and new regional growth will ensure a fast-growing workforce.

Paths to collaboration include those activities that encourage an environment of information sharing. Involving parents in order to influence their children is as important as creating awareness of the transferability of community college credits amongst the network. Continuing to reach across state and international borders to collaborate with teachers and institutions on education and cultural exchanges and activities enhances the business edge of this region, particularly with an emphasis on bilingualism. Further, local industries should become involved in the classroom and with career camps, providing pathways to employment.

Continued progress with updating technology and classrooms to meet the changing demands of a technical education is also critical. Providing support to home schooling and charter schools gives alternative pathways to excellent educational opportunities while also releasing pressure on overcrowded public classrooms. Additionally, technical education has a lot of opportunity for collaboration—AWC has welding, automotive, air conditioning and other technical areas while there are four universities in San Luis R.C. in the liberal arts, humanities, and technical programs.

Lastly, the government needs to be a facilitator, not an inhibitor, of what the community needs. More funding and better understanding of local issues are critical at the state level.

***Tourism: strengths of the region's tourism industry, hindrances to expansion, opportunities for growth, and regional collaboration***

Tourism is a huge driver of the region's economy. Strengths of the region's tourism industry include the climate and outdoor recreation opportunities, synergy with the local economy, and the plethora of events that draw tourists to Yuma year after year. The area offers many sites of historical interest, as well as friendly communities and residents that welcome tourists.

Tourism in the area is relatively low-cost compared to Phoenix and Tucson, which helps to draw thousands of visitors to the area each year. However, the "snowbirds" that have traditionally been drawn by the affordability of the area are a shrinking tourist base. The newer Baby Boomer generation of retirees is taking different approaches to travel, with as-yet unpredictable consequences for the area.

Agritourism has grown as a tourism draw, with field-to-feast tours connecting visitors to the bounty of the local agricultural industry. Mexican food is also a draw, although more culinary diversity could strengthen tourism in the area.

Indeed, the cultural diversity of the area is a draw, and Caballeros de Yuma emphasizes this diversity in binational events. The area also offers a great variety of tourism activities, from dove hunting to balloon festivals, and a host of other festivals throughout the winter.

Outdoor recreation is also one of the cornerstones and strengths of Yuma's tourism industry. The Colorado River and Martinez Lake offer boating and fishing opportunities, while the desert and nearby sand dunes provide opportunities for hiking and off-roading. The sunshine and climate are main draws for many winter visitors, and revitalized parks, Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, and vibrant downtown give tourists additional ways to enjoy the sunshine within the City of Yuma.

Though tourism is thriving and viable, there are many hindrances that hold it back from its full potential. For example, there are few places in Yuma to exchange pesos for dollars, despite our proximity to Mexico and the amount of international travelers. . In the past, stores would accept pesos, but do not any longer. Also, in the past, customers from Mexico would not be charged tax. These situations no longer exist. Long lines at the border detract casual travelers, and the only 24-hour sentry is at San Luis. A lack of expansion at other ports bottlenecks easy access. Political turmoil on both sides of the border also negatively impacts the perception of the region.

A decline in winter visitor populations must also be addressed. Outside of the region, there is misinformation regarding crime and border safety, leading to misperceptions of the region and a bad reputation. The message must be managed for

reputational improvement, and the region must be differentiated from other destinations like Phoenix, Tucson and Las Vegas. Some items are beyond the control of the region, such as exchange rates and a strengthening dollar and global warming and escalating heat concerns.

Plus, businesses in the area need to be customer-service oriented; a high level of customer service does not exist on a consistent basis. The high seasonality of Yuma reduces the consistent level of quality businesses, particularly in restaurants.

There are opportunities to explore and exploit to make up for these shortfalls. The new generation of winter visitors are more mobile and have different needs and wants than previous generations. The community needs to understand, adapt and proactively market to these changing needs. Many of our perceived negatives—heat—are also positives—warm winters. The first step should be creating a brand for the region, incorporating our strengths like beautiful winters, low-cost travel, cultural events, culinary authenticity, historical points of interest, sports such as hunting and fishing, and agriculture. Yuma 101 is a great example of getting a positive story out about Yuma. Economic tourism is a viable option here, and advertising campaigns reaching out to outside communities about our strengths can attract visitors. This can be supported by our governments by economic incentives and support to local businesses. We should market our weather globally during the winter months. Additionally, YRMC and the University of Arizona will be one of the hallmark programs for the Precision Medicine program giving Yuma positive global exposure.

Other initiatives can facilitate collaboration, as well. The governmental environment should make it easier for people to be creative through less regulation, common goals, and identified metrics. By focusing on a message of “we are all ambassadors”, every opportunity in both the private and public sector to share information and market the region as the cornerstone of an international four-corners—Yuma, California, Sonora, Baja—may be utilized. Developing a comprehensive marketing and branding approach to place the message regionally and globally can raise awareness of the attractions in the region. And as always, enhanced communications amongst stakeholders is critical to success. A master calendar between all the communities, for example, would have greater visibility and attract a larger number of visitors while sharing resources.