

Commerce official gets earful at meeting

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Posted: 01/25/2012 09:58:58 PM MST

Photo: John Fernandez, U.S. assistant secretary of commerce for economic... (Robin Zielinski/Sun-News)

LAS CRUCES - John Fernandez, assistant secretary of commerce for the Obama administration's economic development department, said he came to Las Cruces - not to tell anyone what to do - but to listen to what they had to say.



Annette Morales gave him an earful.

"I am disappointed in the Obama administration. It is unfortunate," said the small business owner from New Mexico. "There is very little that has come to rural communities. I understand Arizona and Texas and New Mexico now are Republican states, but nonetheless, we are the gateway to the Americas," she said, adding that she urged the Obama administration "to consider looking more at rural communities along the border because we feel neglected."

Morales, whose business is focused on community building and planning, was one of about 30 economic development professionals from the region who gathered Wednesday on the New Mexico State University campus for a roundtable discussion with Fernandez on how to build stronger economic development initiatives.

Other participants echoed the sentiment that rural areas were not being adequately addressed in economic development initiatives.

"I am not sure where these programs were conceived. Obviously, they haven't been conceived to fit rural areas," Davin Lopez, president of the Mesilla Valley Economic Development Alliance, told Fernandez. "I am sure not just New Mexico is in this hole. I am sure the Wyomings, South Dakotas, North Dakotas of the world feel the same thing. I am sure New Mexico is not alone."

Fernandez, whose stop in Las Cruces was part of his travel through the country to listen to new ideas and push the president's initiatives, said after the meeting that there have been economic development programs created specifically for rural areas.

"There are a number of important initiatives where rural America is front and center. Is there more to do? Absolutely," he said. "That's why we need to build an economy driven by innovation, leveling the playing field and encouraging investment in America."

He also said that "an important message" he wanted to deliver was that "we can't treat rural America as separate from urban America. We need to have strategies that build bridges between rural America and urban America."

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