

## Lamesa experiencing unforeseen economic boom

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There's a shopping center on the northern outskirts of Lamesa with an empty suite in between a BEALLS and a CVS Pharmacy.

Shadows of the letters that spell "Walmart" are still visible above the entrance.

When the retail giant pulled its presence from Lamesa, residents feared the town would suffer.

Two years later, Nathan Tafoya, executive director of the Lamesa Economic Development Corp. and Lamesa Economic Alliance Project, said that hasn't been the case.

"People don't realize what's happening in little old Lamesa," he said.

Since the beginning of this year, alone, it was announced that the town of roughly 9,400 people will now be home to two major business operations - a United States Silica Plant and another solar panel farm. Each one will bring jobs to Lamesa - both permanent and short-term positions.

The U.S. Silica plant is the newest large employer in the area.

Michael Lawson, vice president of investor relations and corporate communications for U.S. Silica, said the plant is about 40 percent complete and production is slowly starting.

U.S. Silica and SandBox Logistics, a frac sand haul company that works closely with U.S. Silica, are anticipated to bring between 200 to 250 jobs to the area. Lawson said the aim is to hire as many locals as possible.

The Lamesa Independent School District is taking steps to aid that, said Lamesa ISD Superintendent Jim Knight. The school district passed a \$30,000,400 bond election in May, part of which will be used to create a new career and technology center.

"I know they're going to continually need CDL drivers," Knight said.

He envisions the career and technology center as being a place to help students train for a CDL license, among other specialty training.

Knight expects school enrollment will be impacted by the business boom, though it's too soon to tell the extent.

The Lamesa medical district will likely get a boost, too, according to Cris Norris, chair of the Lamesa Health Board.

"I think it'll be a positive for our community," he said. "The U.S. Silica Plant will definitely help with the tax base."

He anticipates it also bringing more commercial health insurance to the area.

Tafoya said this is one of the best years, in terms of development, that Lamesa has seen in a while.

"After Walmart, we definitely saw an increase in entrepreneurs and mom and pop shops, locally owned and family-owned businesses," Tafoya said. "They've cropped up around town but there seems to be somewhat of a concentration in the downtown area."

Another company called OCI Solar Power announced in late February that it's also bringing jobs to Lamesa this year.

Though many are short-term positions, the Project Ivory Solar Facility is expected to bring jobs to Lamesa through construction with a few permanent positions and land-lease contracts, according to a statement from A-J Media archives from Lamesa Mayor Josh Stevens.

TaFoya said other business have shown an interest in Lamesa, too. Much of it has revolved around existing structures around town, he said, but a few have shown interest in new construction.

The city is bracing for the influx of new positions and growth of population with a new apartment complex, he said.

The 80-unit complex will be the first new housing complex the town has seen in the last 40 to 50 years, TaFoya said. The project is expected to break ground later this year.

The effects are being felt all around the city, TaFoya said. It's easy to assume the Silica Plant is the cause of the economic boost, but TaFoya believes it's a little more than that.

"I don't know if I can attribute it to national tax reform or U.S. Silica, but we're seeing a massive increase in commercial activities in our community," TaFoya said. "My office is just fielding calls every day. It's almost like there's something else or somebody new looking to do business here, looking to start something new. We're playing catch up in some regard."