

## **Simmons: Donna is poised for explosive growth**

**By Steve Taylor - August 11, 2014**

DONNA, RGV – Donna Mayor David Simmons is not fazed by a breakdown in negotiations for the City of Pharr to take a 40 percent stake in the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge.

In fact, Simmons is now rather pleased because he believes Donna can comfortably handle debt payments on the \$30 million loan the city took out to build the bridge. Indeed, he foresees a great future ahead for his city and the bridge, which opened in December 2010.

“People say the loan we took out to build the bridge has crippled the city. It’s true we had to raise taxes and now have the highest tax rates in the Valley in order to repay the loan. But, I believe things are turning around. I think people will see this bridge as a great investment,” Simmons told the Guardian, in an exclusive interview.

Simmons acknowledges he and the city commissioners took some flak for having the highest tax rate in the Valley. “It is hard to say we have to raise your taxes. But, things are turning around. When I came in we did not even have a credit rating. Now, I am pleased to say we are at a Class ‘A’ rating. In six years we have turned this city around. We are looking at lowering our tax rate. In October we will be lowering our tax rates. We are stable. We are doing some refinancing of our bonds. We have a 30-year bond floating out there and we are getting ready to pay that off. We are now ready to give back to the community.”

Simmons said it is a little known fact that truck movements are going up daily at the Donna Bridge whereas at other ports of entry in the Valley they are going down. “We have the payments in place to pay the debt for the next two years. We were not struggling at all,” he said.

Donna Mayor David Simmons says the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge will soon be carrying southbound ‘empties.’

Simmons pointed out that at a little over 1,000 feet the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge is the shortest in the region. It has four lanes each way. And, crucially, it has a presidential permit for commercial trucks to use the international bridge. He said the city’s lobbyists in Washington, D.C., led by former Congressman Silvestre Reyes, have been helping Donna secure more federal funding in order to expand operations at the bridge.

“We have been working on getting southbound empties, trucks that are returning to Mexico without any cargo. These trucks pay the same amount in bridge fees as those that have a payload. We already have the facility, the pad. But, we need additional facilities. We are going to have to buy the x-ray machine,” Simmons said.

Simmons said the City of Donna is working closely with local and federal legislators to expand the port to provide for the processing of industrial and commercial traffic. “The plan is to have dual inspections, on our side, to house the U.S. and Mexican customs officers. This will save time for the truck drivers. Once the truck clears there will be no second inspection on the Mexican side.”

Simmons said he hopes to have everything in place for southbound “empties” to start crossing the Donna Bridge in the next six months. “This will be tremendous. Each truck pays \$21.50 to cross and we are projecting an additional \$2 million in fees. Currently, we take in about \$1 million so it is going to be a big boost. We are very happy,” Simmons said.

The Donna City Commission is not the only entity that is placing its bets on a large increase in additional visitors from Mexico crossing the international bridge. Walmart is too. The giant retailer is building a large superstore on the corner of Interstate 2 and Highway 493 in Donna. The company has crunched the numbers and projected a big increase in traffic from shoppers in Rio Bravo and neighboring communities in Tamaulipas.

“We always get negative publicity in the press but the Walmart superstore development is extremely positive. It is 186,000 square feet in size and should be completed by October, in time for Christmas. Walmart executives are looking for that influx from Mexico. They will come and shop and turn around and go back,” Simmons said.

In fact, Walmart purchased bought close to 75 acres in Donna, in preparation of letting nine one-acre pad sites to build a mall. “On the remaining 35 acres to the east they are looking at a possible Sam’s. They are banking on the sales from Mexico. Walmart would not be here if they did not think our international bridge was going to be a success,” Simmons said.

Another thing going for Donna, Simmons believes, is the fact that the state of Tamaulipas owns much of the land immediately south of the international bridge. “We know the state officials want to develop that land as commercial. There will be a lot of investment there in the coming years. It makes sense because the officials want to divert all the trucks coming from the new Mazatlán to Matamoros superhighway away from Reynosa. The southern bypass around Reynosa is going to help the Pharr and Donna bridges enormously,” Simmons said.

Simmons added that Donna is not trying to steal business from any other Rio Grande Valley city that has an international bridge. “I am all about regional cooperation. We do not want to take anything away from anyone else. We believe we will be taking the empty trucks that are sitting in line waiting in Pharr and they will get the full trucks. There is enough to go around for all of us. Besides, we are a region now. We need to start thinking regionally.”

A longstanding criticism of Donna city and economic development leaders is that they have not succeeded in getting industrial and retail pad sites developed along I-2, in stark contrast to the cities of Mission, McAllen, Pharr and Weslaco. Simmons said people would often say that when traveling along

the expressway they would reach Donna and see nothing. Things are changing on that front too, the mayor said.

“There is no question about it. We are poised for growth. No one else has the frontage we have. Every day we are getting calls. We have had some interest from some big developers. I think people are looking at Donna in a very different light now,” Simmons said.

Simmons also said that no review of Donna’s economic outlook would be complete without giving great credit to state Rep. Armando “Mando” Martinez for securing \$85 million in state funding for State Highway 68, which will run from I-2 at Val Verde Road on the western end of Donna to the South Texas International Airport on I-69 Central in Edinburg. Martinez, a Democrat from Weslaco, is vice-chair of the House Committee on Transportation.

“That is going to relieve a lot of traffic at the intersection of 83 and 281,” Simmons said. “We appreciate Representative Martinez’s leadership and vision.” Simmons predicts the city leadership in Edinburg working much more closely with their counterparts in Donna as a result of this new highway. “It is going to be a great trade corridor. At one end you have an international port of entry and at the other an airport for cargo and an interstate going north,” Simmons said.

Simmons said the Texas Department of Transportation will also be investing \$13.6 million on a road reconstruction project on South FM 493 from Champion Street to US 281 Military. “This will allow for a more efficient flow of traffic from the International Bridge to the City and Interstate 2,” he said.

Marga Lopez is the new executive director for economic development in Donna. A native of Edinburg, she previously worked for the legendary former mayor of Eagle Pass, Chad Foster. Lopez believes Donna is poised for tremendous economic growth. In a recent newsletter, she listed some of the projects underway.

“The economic outlook is bright and prospering,” the newsletter stated. “The City of Donna hired Fort Worth based Buxton to develop a targeted retail recruitment and business retention strategy. With the momentum of an 180,000-plus square foot Walmart Supercenter being constructed, much positive growth is anticipated.”

The newsletter explains that the Walmart superstore will be surrounded by 9 pad-sites along Interstate 2 and FM 493 with an entrance on Mile 8.5. She said another commercial subdivision along FM 493 is also being constructed with the anchor establishment being an assisted living facility.

Additionally, Lopez’s newsletter states, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held on July 14 for the new CVS pharmacy on the corner of Interstate 2 and Main Street. The 13,225 square foot CVS Pharmacy, also offers an adjacent lot available for sale.

On the industrial front, Lopez highlighted the decision of Paramount Citrus, one of the largest growers, shippers, packers and marketers of fresh citrus in the U.S., to purchase a 6 acre tract to expand its warehousing and distribution center in Donna.

“Donna Economic Development Corporation owns a 22 acre industrial park ready with infrastructure in place for any warehousing or manufacturing facility,” the newsletter stated.

Lopez added that Donna has four new residential subdivisions with 242 lots available for sale. “The future looks promising for the city of Donna. We are eager to welcome new business and help retain existing businesses.

In addition to being executive director of Maverick County Development Corporation, the economic development arm of the City of Eagle Pass, Lopez has also served as interim city manager of Eagle Pass and director of the city’s two international bridges. She has been named Eagle Pass Journal’s Public Manager of the Year. She graduated from what was then Pan American University with a BBA in marketing in 1984.

Mayor Simmons said Lopez is a key player in the future growth of Donna. “With her vast experience, Marga is a natural fit for the new position of executive director of economic development,” he said.