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GATEWAY TO IMPERIAL COUNTY

CALEXICO

Port funds cut for now

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CALEXICO — Local officials are disappointed at the loss of funding this week for the Calexico Land Port-of-Entry improvements but hopeful that it will return.

U.S. Rep. Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista, announced Thursday that the Senate voted 87-13 to approve a bill that cuts \$84 million in funding for the improvements, and the legislation was signed by the President.

"While we continue to lose an estimated billion dollars in commerce due to inefficiency at our borders, this short-sighted budget undermines the progress we were making to create jobs and shorten wait times. The House Republicans' no-jobs agenda takes us back to square-one," Filner said in a statement.

County Director of Intergovernmental Relations Bob Ham said that the funding is "probable to come back in six weeks," though, as the vote was on a six-week continuing resolution of the budget.

"We're hopeful. We're pushing," he said. "We're not going to give up trying."

He said that almost \$15 million has been spent on the project so far and that there's concern over that money going to waste.

"To walk away from it now is to spend \$15 million on nothing," Ham said.

Ham said the port of entry project affects jobs and commerce for a lot of people in the area.

Mayor John Moreno echoed his concerns.

"It puts a hold on something that we've been planning for the last several years," he said. "... We were looking at easing up the wait times and making the trip to Mexico and vice versa more pleasurable."

Moreno said he has directed city staff to look into other alternatives including a potential public-private partnership.

The fate of the city's plans to alter Cesar Chavez Boulevard and West Second Street in relation to the port of entry improvements haven't been discussed at length at this time, he said.

County Supervisor and Border Counties Coalition chairman John Renison was also dismayed at the news.

"It's certainly a big disappointment. The federal government just doesn't get it," he said.

He said current procedures at the Calexico downtown port of entry aren't working, and while SENTRI passes can help get people through more quickly, they aren't affordable for everybody.

Renison believes working closer with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol could help alleviate wait times, which in turn affects the area economy.

"We're faced with a real problem here and need to talk about it and seek real solutions," he said.