

Lode officials hang out shingle

County looks to bolster stagnant economy

By Dana M. Nichols

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SAN ANDREAS - A number of the candidates running for office this year in Calaveras County have criticized county government for not aggressively promoting economic development.

They way they tell it, Calaveras has for years missed opportunities while neighboring counties, particularly Tuolumne, have attracted new businesses and revived old ones. The Sierra Pacific Industries mill that reopened last year near Sonora is a vivid example.

Calaveras County - unlike its neighbors - does not have a county-supported economic-development agency. And Calaveras has the highest unemployment rate in the region, 13.4 percent, almost 3 points higher than the statewide average, according to the California Employment Development Department.

But many Calaveras leaders - including county officials - are working to promote economic development and some of their efforts promise to become visible soon.

Dave Haley, president of the private Calaveras Economic Development Company, announced last month it is merging with the County Chamber of Commerce.

"The Calaveras EDC was formed in 1981 and has been dormant for the most part since," Haley said. The group revived in 2010, however, and has published a guide intended to help businesses relocate to the county.

Jeff Davidson, president of the chamber's board of directors, said the merger will energize the work of both organizations.

"The goals are really the same," he said.

The chamber board will appoint a nine-member advisory group, Davidson said, to help find properties to suit the needs of relocating or expanding businesses.

"We're going to market Calaveras County as being open for business," Davidson said.

In particular, the group's goal is to add 100 high-tech jobs in the near future.

"We need something besides just tourism. We need something besides construction," Davidson said.

A simultaneous proposal, in its early stages, would boost that goal.

Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky and Clay Hawkins, an assistant county administrator, are holding talks with representatives of Aerospace Corp. on a project that might

use U.S. Department of Homeland Security grant funding to upgrade the county's communications infrastructure.

Although the project would aim to improve communications for emergency services, it would also expand the availability of high-speed Internet connections.

At the same time, public libraries, schools and community colleges in 18 counties - including Calaveras - are cooperating as the Corporation for Education Network Initiatives on tens of millions of dollars worth of fiber-optic cable installation.

Wilensky, and other local officials, for eight years have cooperated to retrain dozens of forest workers who now have jobs thinning forests and providing biomass chips to a newly-retooled electricity plant in neighboring Amador County.

Within a month, a new regional economic-development plan will be completed.

That plan is technically the work of the Central Sierra Economic Development District, an entity created jointly by five counties and several city governments.

The economic organization, however, closed because of financial problems in June 2011.

The group has since contracted with the Tuolumne County Economic Development Authority to handle its affairs, including completing the report.

That draft is done six months ahead of schedule, and it will be sent to the federal government.

Beth Hartline, the Tuolumne authority's assistant director, said the regional report provides detailed data on dozens of projects and will, once approved, make many of those projects eligible for federal grant funding.

That means the U.S. government might help get a sewer line built to a new industrial park or construct a road needed to transport forestry products.

"The feds won't fund anything that is not a long-term job creator," Hartline said. "Construction jobs, they don't count."

One of the most ambitious projects is a combined industrial center, trade school and college campus proposed by businessman Tom Coe on land he owns just north of Valley Springs.

To see the report, visit csedd.org.

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