

CALAVERAS' SAGGING ECONOMY SPURS GATHERING OF BUSINESS LEADERS, OFFICIALS

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SAN ANDREAS - Cliff Edson, one of the newest members of the Board of Supervisors, knows firsthand the dismal economic conditions in Calaveras County.

Edson and his wife, Silvia, operate a restaurant in San Andreas.

"Our business has decreased tremendously," Edson said of the past five years since the housing crash ushered in the Great Recession.

Edson told the story of his restaurant's declining income to introduce a study session he convened Tuesday with other members of the board.

Every board member agrees that "economic development," specifically changes that will provide jobs and hope to their constituents, is a crucial goal for the county.

Three hours of workshop discussion, however, failed to yield much evidence that board members agree on what, if anything, county government should do to promote economic development.

Supervisor Debbie Ponte, who represents Angels Camp, was the strongest advocate for having the county government hire a full-time staffer to focus on tasks such as helping businesses to locate in Calaveras County.

Calaveras business leaders and government officials for years have spoken enviously of neighboring Tuolumne County, where a government-supported economic development agency has been a catalyst for reopening a lumber mill and filling vacant spaces in shopping malls.

Ann Forrest, the chief executive officer and president of Destination Angels Camp, a volunteer economic development agency in Angels Camp, supported Ponte's view.

"Volunteer economic development agencies ... do not have a very good track record," Forrest said.

Other than Ponte, however, no supervisors specifically called for a paid staffer to pursue economic development. Instead, they urged businesses that hit roadblocks to call supervisors for help, or called for reform of regulations to reduce obstacles for businesses.

And Interim County Administrative Officer John Blacklock said that heavy private sector involvement has been key to the success of efforts in which he was involved in the past in Solano County.

"It would be a mistake, I think, to say, 'Let government do it,' " Blacklock said.

Some business leaders called on county officials to ease land-use regulations to create more "flexibility" for business projects.

Supervisor Chris Wright, in contrast, said that while he favors reforming burdensome regulations, businesses need to ask for specific changes rather than vaguely defined "flexibility."

Wright also said he believes conserving ranching and forestry lands is a priority.

"We need to develop more conservation easements for working lands," he said.

Members of the public who spoke at the workshop asked supervisors to direct their energy at everything from pushing state officials to locate a college campus in the county to improving child care for working families.

Bob Dean told supervisors that he'd witnessed a similar discussion five years ago that led nowhere. This time, he urged county leaders to inventory county resources - physical, such as forests and water, and human, such as college campuses.

Dean said economic development has to be based in the resources the community has to work with.

"How are we going to make this a viable economic community?" Dean asked.

Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce President Jeff Davidson, toward the end of Tuesday's workshop, voiced disappointment that the session had covered a wide range of topics but yielded little consensus.

"I think the whole point is to stop blaming and get planning," Davidson said.

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