



SM workshop generates ideas, work plan for economic improvement

## North County business leaders strategize on success

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Despite a struggling job market and stagnant home sales, northern Santa Barbara County has the resources to become an economic powerhouse if business leaders work together.

That's the message delivered by three nationally and internationally recognized speakers and others Thursday, to nearly 300 people at the Radisson Hotel in Santa Maria.

"We're committed to working together," Era Polly, president of the Santa Maria Association of Realtors, told the crowd, which included City Council members, county supervisors and business leaders from throughout the region who are hoping to build long-term regional economic vitality, enhance the area's image and improve the stability and quality of life for residents.

"Santa Maria is facing very challenging times," Polly continued. "To make a positive difference, it'll take people like you and me to step up and get involved."

The all-day Economic Forum & Strategy Workshop was organized by the Economic Alliance of Northern Santa Barbara County, and aimed to set initial goals.

Speaker Delore Zimmerman, head of The Praxis Strategy Group, will return Nov. 7 to 8 with his recommendations for both short- and long-term ideas for the region.

In addition to the November report, the workshop launched a three-year campaign to develop economic strategies for the region and begin implementing them, said workshop co-chair Ray Deutsch, director of community relations for Westberg & White Architects & Planners.

Speaking first, Bill Watkins, executive director at the Center for Economic Research & Forecasting at California Lutheran University, painted a grim economic picture for the county.

The county's South Coast is among the leaders of coastal California's trend toward a future of contrasts, he told the crowd.

"Wealth without economic growth; consumption without investment. The wealthy and the poor living side by side.

"The South Coast is not going to help North County," he said. "We're trying to help you change that forecast."

Home prices are still falling, food prices are rising. "Because of what happened in 2008, the whole country has to rebalance its balance sheet," he said. "We're not ready for a sustained economic recovery."

Watkins described 1987 to 2007 as "boom years," a time when the North County saw its wine industry grow, expansion of the Chumash Casino, and a vital real estate market.

"What didn't happen," he said, is that while North County expanded, it didn't build an independent economic engine.

"You have fantastic resources, but you don't have the engine. It's going to have to come from the people in this room," he said.

The scenario outlined by Joel Kotkin, an internationally recognized futurist author, was a little brighter.

Kotkin told the gathering that the United States is in good shape, long term.

“I think agriculture and energy will be critical down the road, and you’re sitting in a prime area for both,” he said. “If we could tap even our onshore oil in California we could solve our budget problem.”

Kotkin talked about redefining sustainability “beyond the Green Jihad,” and said it has to include a balance of social, economic and environmental interests. And he talked about how to create a “high performance community.”

Class is the biggest issue of the 21st Century, he said. There are “too many young people sitting around.”

In that vein, he said, the big problem relevant to Santa Maria is that vocational education has been given short shrift.

Zimmerman gave examples of success stories, using his home state of North Dakota as a starting point for illustrating how a region can rebound by using its existing strengths.

Other examples he used were Greenwood, Miss., home to Viking Kitchen Appliances, and Wenatchee, Wa., picked by Yahoo! for its new Confluence Technology Center.

He pointed to the press release issued by Yahoo! as an example of what industry is looking for.

“We chose North Central Washington for this important facility because of the great quality of life here,” the release reads. “The immediate availability of suitable space, the ‘can-do’ spirit of community leaders, the cost and reliability of electricity, and the access to a world-class fiber optic network. They’ve taken all the right steps to create a terrific environment for us.”

Zimmerman said he’s “keen” on agriculture because by 2050 there will be 9 billion people on the planet who need to be fed, 400 million of those in the United States.

Energy consumption will also increase, but it will be regionally driven, for instance wind power in North Dakota and water power in the Northwest.

Resourceful leadership, he said, is “doing more with less.”

“There’s so much human potential and you have to harness it. How do you craft a singular purpose?”

Following lunch, the gathering broke into groups focusing on industries such as wine, oil, renewable energy and clean-tech, agriculture, tourism, health care and transportation.

Many ideas involved coordinating regional efforts with regard to transportation, marketing, and recruitment of industry.

In the tourism group, ideas included developing a major regional sports complex with pools, ball fields and promoting in it conjunction with attractions such as wine tasting and Pismo Beach.

Another centered on developing a collaborative marketing effort and a central clearing house for regional events so that weekends aren’t double-booked.

Michael Hendrick, general manager at the Santa Ynez Valley Marriott, suggested hotels join ranks to improve their marketing, and create a tourism business improvement district.

Regional branding and rethinking the permitting process for events were also suggestions.

“There were great ideas that came out today,” Deutsch said after the workshop. “This will give us a stepping stone for where to go next.”