

County vitality sinks in jobs ranking

Region rated at top in 2002

By Mike Harris

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The “bleak” Ventura County job market is still reeling from the great recession, which hit the region as hard as any in the nation, the president and CEO of the Economic Development Collaborative of Ventura County said at a job symposium Friday.

“Ventura County, prior to our current condition, had been a national leader in jobs and economic vitality,” Bruce Stenslie told about 100 people at the event sponsored by the Ventura County Civic Alliance, an initiative of the Ventura County Community Foundation. “Our success had been built on the skills of the Ventura County workforce.”

Since 2007, however, “Ventura County has taken a particularly hard dive,” he said at the conference at the Ventura County Office of Education in Camarillo.

“We actually approach what I would argue is the bottom of economic performance and the bottom of labor market conditions just about anywhere in urban areas of the United States,” he said.

Stenslie said that in 2002, the county was ranked fourth by the Milken Institute of Santa Monica on a list of the 200 best urban markets to do business in, based partly on the growth of jobs, wages and salaries and the density of high-tech businesses.

In 2005, the county was ranked seventh on the list in terms of wage and salary growth. In 2007, it still ranked in the top 15 percent nationally, based on all economic factors.

But by 2009, the county had plummeted to 158th on the list, and this year to 180th, Stenslie said.

The dramatically lower rankings were based primarily on the county having lost 31,400 payroll jobs since December 2007, more than 11 percent of all such jobs here, he said.

In January 2002, there were 24,200 unemployed workers in the county, with an unemployment rate of 6 percent, Stenslie said. As of August, there were 48,200, with the unemployment rate at 11.2 percent, he said.

Providing all Californians with access to high-quality postsecondary education and skills training is key to lowering the unemployment rate, he said. More education equals higher employment rates and greater earnings, he said.

Stenslie said some 43 percent of all California job openings between now and 2016 will be so-called “middle-skill” jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

Another speaker Friday, John Bibby, vice president of human resources for St. John’s Regional Medical Center in Oxnard, also stressed the importance of education but said the county lacks some educational resources.

“The lack of locally available education/training for critical priority jobs in allied health is a major issue,” said Bibby, a member of the Workforce Investment Board of Ventura County.

For example, he said, there is no education or training available in the county for pharmacists; occupational, physical or speech therapists; or certified coders.

Futurist Nathalie Gossett said people need to stay ahead of the jobs curve, through education, if they hope to be viable in the near-future workplace.

In the medical field alone, Gosset said, new jobs will include medical organ and bone designers and replication information technologists. Corresponding education will include replication technology, tissue engineering and compatibility, and cell manipulation.

“If you don’t re-invent yourself,” workers become obsolete, said Gosset, head of marketing and business development at the Alfred Mann Institute at USC. “It is your responsibility” to stay relevant by constantly learning new job skills.

