
IN MY VIEW: Economic Development Summit 2024

May 11, 2024

Lately I've been feeling disillusioned about the prospects for economic growth in Del Norte County. With the impending demise of the Tri-Agency Economic Development Authority, it is not clear who will lead the efforts to attract new businesses, jobs, and affordable housing that our community so badly needs to thrive.

I decided to attend the annual Economic Summit sponsored by the Crescent City/Del Norte Chamber of Commerce. I wanted to see what was happening with economic development. I was not sure who was speaking before I went but I was especially interested to hear what the County had to report.

There Is Hope

There were many good presentations on local successes that were uplifting and helped to buoy my spirits. There is still hope for creating more housing and better paying jobs. One theme that popped up throughout the conference is that some projects can take a decade or longer to see through to completion.

The morning session featured progress updates from the Elk Valley Rancheria and Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation on their economic development projects. There was a report on the economic benefits of improving air transportation and a status report on surface transportation projects.

Elk Valley Rancheria

The summit was hosted by the Elk Valley Rancheria, and we heard an update on how their master development plan is progressing. A couple years ago the Elk Valley Rancheria opened a new casino, restaurant, and event center in a beautiful location on a hill overlooking the ocean south of Crescent City.

What people may not remember is that their master development plan is twenty years old. It required persistence and determination to push this plan forward. It took eight years just to get approval to purchase the Martin Ranch and put the land into trust so that the development could begin.

Recently the Elk Valley Rancheria opened a fuel mart on the road to the casino and has started to build the "Elk Trails Project" with interpretive signs and platforms to facilitate viewing of the resident elk herd. They

also plan to build a 92-room hotel with views of South Beach. This is what economic development looks like.

Tolowa Dee-ni'

We heard about the many projects that the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation has completed recently. They constructed six new homes for tribal elders, implemented homeless housing assistance, and run a food distribution program that serves 125 households. Food and housing are critical elements of economic development.

Though these services are for tribal members only, they emphasized how these tribal projects help the entire community. They are doing their part to solve issues that are county-wide, and their efforts reduce the burden on the County. They also have an "Early Head Start" child development center that is open to all.

The largest multiyear project that the Tolowa have in progress is the Howonquet Village and Resort. They have purchased and are redeveloping the old Ship Ashore Resort. The old hotel will be removed by the end of this year, literally clearing the way for the construction of a new resort village which will draw in more tourists.

Big Embarrassment

After listening to these very informative presentations, the morning session ended with Dean Wilson representing Del Norte County. I was curious to hear what economic development projects the county is working on. When he was finished several people commented that his speech was an embarrassment.

Wilson launched into a comedy routine with tone-deaf jokes and politically incorrect humor. He shared a cop story describing a person with mental illness "wearing a tinfoil hat." He told a joke about the "midget" he encountered during the local filming of Star Wars. It was all very cringe. Economic development is not a joke.

When Wilson eventually veered close to discussing the county's economic development efforts, he made a cursory reference to the County's economic development plan without referring to any specific projects. When he mentioned the adopted County housing plan he said, "Its mandated otherwise you wouldn't do it."

Crescent City Shines

The highlight of the afternoon session was a presentation by City Manager Eric Wier. He described the many projects that the city is working on with the strategic vision to make Crescent City a destination city. Wier quoted an old saying. "Success is where preparation meets opportunity." This describes Crescent City's efforts.

Wier explained that for the twenty years that he has worked for the City, improvements to Front Street have been a priority. The City cobbled together funding from a variety of sources and as of today, half of the Front

Street project is completed. Funding has been secured to complete the project by the end of next year.

The City also plans to establish a one stop Welcome Center, build a transit center across the street, and add amenities to Beachfront Park. The City's most monumental success is the development of more than 300 new housing units. Some of these projects were years in the planning, but the hard work of City staff is paying off.

Successful Summit

This was one of the best local economic summits that I have attended. It featured a high school student panel to share their thoughts and wishes. There were informative presentations from Crescent City Harbor, Sutter Coast Health, Del Norte Unified School District, Food Council and Partnership for the Performing Arts.

So many good people and organizations are working hard every day to make improvements to our community. Healthcare, housing, food, education, arts, transportation, childcare, and new business development are all essential components of an economically vibrant community.

There is much more to be done, but it is encouraging to see the collaboration and determination on display at this summit. Sometimes it is hard to recognize progress when change happens slowly, but if we step back and look, occasionally the picture becomes clearer.

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