



EDITORIALS

Editorial: Ventura County economic forecast veers off course

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Bill Watkins says the Ventura County economy is going to hell in a regulatory handbasket and it's the fault of the county's "political class."

Without ever defining who, exactly, makes up this nefarious "political class," Mr. Watkins painted a bleak picture at his annual economic forecast last week as the executive director of the California Lutheran University Center for Economic Research and Forecasting.

The political class, he said, "does not want to see job growth" in Ventura County. "We can only imagine the uproar if some company proposed a new manufacturing facility that would employ 1,000 people."

We, on the other hand, can only imagine the flood of news releases from politicians of every stripe taking credit for such a facility and the line of folks eager for those jobs so they no longer have to commute hours each day north and south of our county.

Mr. Watkins' analysis and attack on the political class fit his long-standing political view, which opposes the county's slow-growth measures and the state's environmental protection laws.

That analysis is not supported by someone closer to the front lines of jobs and economic development. Brian Gabler, the Simi Valley economic development director and chair of the Workforce Development Board's Outreach Committee, wrote a column that appeared in The Star that touted the success of Ventura County as a home for manufacturing and business.

Mr. Gabler gave us specifics: 900 local manufacturers and 20,000 small- and medium-sized businesses are prospering in Ventura County.

Much of Mr. Watkins' forecast spins from his comparison of where we are today based on where we were when the recession began in October 2007. He says the state and nation have been recovering jobs quicker than we have in the county and "the end-result weakness in job formation implies that the county's job level has not yet reached the pre-recession high."

While that interpretation might imply such a conclusion, the numbers show that the total number of jobs in Ventura County in October was exceeded only one time in history, in May 2006.

Mr. Watkins counters that the job growth we have had is really bad jobs, in education and health services, and in the leisure and hospitality sectors. Rapid job growth in those sectors, he says, "can only result in increased inequality, increased homelessness and increased crowding in existing homes."

While those sectors were climbing, the county lost jobs in manufacturing, construction, finance and agriculture, over 10

percent to pre-recession levels. But it's not just in Ventura County. There's been a double-digit decline in manufacturing, construction and finance jobs in California in the same time frame. And the United States also has seen double-digit declines in construction and manufacturing jobs since the start of the recession.

Mr. Watkins believes that it's only through the rapid and burgeoning construction of new homes that we can attract new jobs, and we can only get those new homes built if we abandon the anti-sprawl SOAR initiatives.

We don't buy the argument. There certainly has been opposition to new residential developments, but there is no evidence to link that opposition to declining middle-class jobs here, particularly when we see middle-class jobs disappearing everywhere in the nation.

We encourage a robust discussion of our economic future, with a clear understanding of options. This forecast seems more intent on promulgating a political philosophy than on providing necessary information for that important discussion.

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