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More businesses are considering the Valley for developments - but it's still not an easy sell

By Melinda Morales

Richard Allen, chief executive officer of The Allen Group, refers to Visalia as the "jewel of the Valley," a great place to live and a great place to raise children.

He feels similarly about the type of environment businesses that consider moving into the area will find. He tells them land costs are low, workers are readily available, distributors would have easy access to rail and highway transportation, and their businesses would operate in a population center of about 35 million customers.

And although there have been some major success stories of corporate giants moving into his industrial developments - most recently apparel distributor VF Inc. and the Jo-Ann Stores West Coast Distribution Center - he knows the Central Valley is largely a well-kept secret, and that has just begun to change.

"As Visalia has grown, it has become more accepted in the industrial market," he said.

Much of the interest of late in the Central Valley, and in Visalia in particular, has been by large-scale distributors that are drawn by its central location in the state and by the presence of a major United Parcel Service hub.

"This one thing has driven the success of the Visalia market for Jo-Ann, Coast Distribution, Global Motorsports, Jim's Formal Wear and others," he said.

Still, he said, making the decision to move a major entity here weighs heavily on the minds of corporate executives.

"You can't get fired for going to Southern California's Inland Empire, that's easy," he said. "Coming here is a tough decision."

He credits a number of factors for the growing acceptance of the Central Valley, including the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the effect of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's pro-business initiatives.

"All those things affect their decisions," he said.

He said the recent influx of homeowners into the Central Valley, which has caused cities to take another look at their plans to handle growth, is a positive endorsement of the region.

"Other cities are dealing with congestion and no-growth initiatives along the coast, which in turn has caused some of the growth in Visalia," he said. "People are coming here because of that [no-growth] attitude in other places. It stops growth and it forces our children to spend an inordinate amount of money for housing."

He added that if Visalia and the surrounding communities were to take steps to stop growth, as has been done elsewhere, then the rising home values, the new jobs and the new retail businesses "will happen elsewhere."

David B. Hernandez, director of construction services, left, and Richard Allen, CEO of The Allen Group, stand on top of Jo-Ann Stores Inc. at Midstate 99 Distribution Center in west Visalia. Plaza Drive can be seen in the background.

Midstate 99 Distribution Center from same perspective as the photograph, facing west.

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