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Tular County Growth Hitting the Target

By BoNhia Lee

The efforts of Tulare County cities to bring in more jobs and increase shopping opportunities are starting to bear fruit. Tulare County is known for its annual three-day World Ag Expo, which attracts agricultural enthusiasts and businesses from all over the world.

Last year's expo attracted more than 1,600 exhibitors and 100,000 visitors, including 1,500 people from 74 different countries. The event generates an annual economic impact of \$1.2 billion.

But what happens in Tulare County the other 362 days of the year when eyes are not focused on the world's largest agricultural event?

That's when Tulare County cities work on expanding their communities and providing more jobs as well as increased entertainment and shopping choices for their residents.

That work is paying dividends. The county's industrial sector has flourished, and retail businesses are filling new shopping center developments. Tulare County roadways are also finally getting a long-awaited facelift.

Location, location, location

Tulare County's prime location near a main railway corridor and Highway 99 makes it an excellent place for large distribution centers to locate and do business.

Despite the challenging economy, the industrial market remains solid in Tulare County, according to a recent report released by Grubb & Ellis.

In May, The Allen Group, a commercial, office and retail developer, completed two 140,000-square-foot buildings for lease and a 252,000-square-foot distribution facility for International Paper Company at its Midstate 99 Distribution Center in Visalia.

Another 157 acres at Plaza Drive and Riggin Avenue in Visalia is in the process of being annexed to the City of Visalia for industrial development. The City of Tulare is also moving forward with annexation of 280 acres for a business park, according to the report.

"The Central Valley is really becoming an emerging location for distribution for the West Coast," said Jon Cross, director of marketing for The Allen Group.

Cross said large companies are shifting their focus away from doing business in congested places like Los Angeles, where the cost of leasing space is \$10-\$15 per square foot compared to \$3-\$4 per square foot in the Central Valley.

Companies are starting to realize the biggest benefit in Visalia, especially at the Midstate 99 logistics park, is the location. Cross said. The facility is in a UPS regional hub, allowing companies to distribute goods overnight to 98 percent of California at UPS' ground rate.

www.allengroup.com



The MidState center has 11 buildings totaling more than 3 million square feet. Current tenants include VF Corp., International Paper Company, Jo-Ann Stores, Coast Distribution Systems, Workflow One, Worms Way, Bound Tree Medical, ORS Nasco and DATS Trucking.

There are still 200 acres of land remaining in the park for future building opportunities, which would allow for additional buildings up to a million square feet.

"One of the unique things about the Central Valley, especially the Visalia; and Tulare County area, is the fact it is benefiting from not being overdeveloped," Cross said. "There is strong labor, low real estate costs and a great infrastructure system."

The growth of the industrial sector helps to create jobs in the county, said Jim Claybaugh, executive director of the Visalia Economic Development Corp. More than 5,000 people are employed by different industrial park firms in the area, he said.

Most of the jobs are entry-level positions, so companies can hire people with fewer job skills, then give them training and an opportunity for more upward mobility, Claybaugh said.

Shoppers get more choices

Tulare county residents no longer have to travel to Fresno or other bigger cities to do their shopping. Big-name retailers are setting up shop in town. The southern section of the City of Visalia along Mooney Boulevard has seen a lot of commercial development in the last few years, Claybough said.

The Packwood Regional Shopping Center spans 35 acres along both sides of the street. It's anchored on one side by Lowe's Focus I 9 and Best Buy and on the other side by Target.

Retail development has also spread to the city's poorer north side, where a Lowe's store anchors a shopping center at Demaree and Riggin avenues. Meanwhile, a new Target store is expected to open this fall at the Orchard Walk East shopping center at Dinuba and Riggin avenues. Sportsman's

Warehouse, a fishing and hunting retailer, is also scheduled to open a store there.

The City of Dinuba has worked on positioning itself as a regional retail center for the last five years. City leaders want to provide residents with 75-80 percent of their retail and entertainment needs within a 10-minute driving radius.

"We've put a lot of effort and energy into building our retail center and providing diversity in the kinds of retail options that are here for people, so they don't have to make that longer drive to Visalia or Fresno," said Dinuba City Manager Ed Todd.

Right now, Dinuba officials estimate residents are able to carry on about 65 percent of their shopping and entertainment activities within the city.

In 2006, the town's Wal-Mart at El Monte Way was expanded into a Super Wal-Mart. The store added 60,000 square feet of space to sell grocery items. The expansion also created 100 new jobs.

Entertainment is also available closer to home with the recent opening of the 18-hole Ridge Creek Dinuba Golf Club. "I think we're having quite a lot of success in achieving that goal," Todd said, "and we're going to continue building on it."

Measure R funds kick in

Road improvements, using Measure R funds are scheduled to begin this month to help alleviate traffic congestion along several roadways in Tulare County.

Measure R is a one-half cent sales tax passed in 2006 that will generate more than \$652 million to address the county's major transportation needs in the next 30 years.

Fifty percent of the funds will go to improve freeway interchanges, add lanes and increase safety. Another 35 percent will be spent on improving each city and the county's transportation system, which includes pothole repair, repaving streets, bridge repair, traffic signals and sidewalk improvement.

About 14 percent will be spent to improve public transit programs such as the addition of bike lanes and air quality improvements. The last one percent goes to the Tulare County Association of Governments to administer Measure R.

"It's a really exciting time, because we're getting that first glimpse of what we can do with Measure R regionally," said Ted Smalley, executive director of the Tulare County Association of Governments, in the organization's newsletter.

The first regional project to be funded by Measure R begins this month with a signal installation west of Dinuba at Avenue 416 and Road 56.

Later this month, two other regional projects will begin. One is the construction of the Santa Fe overpass in Visalia. The \$12.6-million project will open a major north and south corridor.

A second project is the widening of Road 80 to alleviate traffic between Dinuba and Visalia. According to traffic counts, about 6,000 vehicles use the road daily. The project will widen the road to four lanes from Avenue 304, also known as Goshen Avenue, to Avenue 328.

Other road projects coming up within the next year include: The widening of Scranton Avenue and Indiana Street in Porterville, improving the Ben Maddox overpass in Visalia, installing traffic signals west of Farmersville at the corner of Avenue 280 and Road 156 and conducting a study of the Avenue 416 bridge in Dinuba.