

Community Comment 8/19/2013

By Jon Sapper

Rural Economic Development

This is Jon Sapper for Community Comment.

Quote, "In the volatility of today's economy, rural communities across the country are clamoring for development strategies that create jobs, businesses, and community wealth. Although nearly every town and village, county and countryside is hitching its future to the notion that it can compete in the new global economy, few are clear on the pathway to that success." Closed quote.

The Carsey Institute from the University of New Hampshire weighs in on this issue. They contend that in the past, much of rural economic development relied on the use of natural resources or recruiting industry, often marketing cheap land and labor as community assets. In an era of global competition, those old approaches no longer work. There isn't an elected official today that doesn't list economic development as one of their top priorities. But what does that really mean? It actually means different things to different people.

But one thing is consistent with areas that have successfully bridged their old and new economies. Innovation and innovative thinking have been the hallmark of rural America's ability to garner its share of the global economy. It depends on old firms to do new things in new ways, its workers to capitalize on their knowledge, creativity and skills, its educational institutions to teach the skills that are needed to be competitive and its citizens to be connected to the larger world through technology. Entire nations are betting their futures on policies that promise wealth from educating and attracting citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster. We must do the same.

Carsey says our economic development strategies need to include business incubators, organized industry networks and brokers operating between businesses and sources of specialized technical assistance, including workforce training that includes innovative thinking and entrepreneurship in the foundations of that training.

Economic development necessitates investments in developing that competitive workforce to meet the needs of business and industry in the 21st century.

I applaud the current willingness of College of the Redwoods, Humboldt State University and the local K-12 community to work in partnership with local businesses to chart these new directions. Humboldt County's economic development plan was recently developed and adopted with over 400 local businesses at the table providing direction for this work. That's the way it should be.

The plan is now in place. Let's get on with the work.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.