

Husing: Area has potential, if it can solve problems



John Husing speaks at a luncheon hosted by Joseph W. Brady which featured economic and education experts on Monday afternoon. Husing said the High Desert should have a good year in 2016 but needs to tackle some issues. (James Quigg, Daily Press)

By Steve Hunt
Editor

VICTORVILLE — The High Desert's improving economic picture should be even brighter next year, economist Dr. John Husing said Monday, but problems surrounding the region's high percentage of rental properties threaten to stunt its growth and potential.

Husing served as the keynote speaker at a fundraising luncheon held by Victor Valley College Board President Joseph W. Brady at the Hilton Garden Inn Conference Center. Nearly 300 people attended the event, which also featured San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Ted Alejandre and Victor Valley College President/Superintendent Roger Wagner.

"(Next year) is going to be better than this year," Husing told the crowd. "It just takes time to reach edge markets, and (the High Desert is) an edge market. But rentals are a tough issue. You've got to find a way to get your housing stock back where it belongs" with higher percentages of owner-occupied, single-family homes.

Despite unemployment rates still significantly higher than the state and county rates — ranging from 6.6 percent in Apple Valley and Victorville to 8.4 percent in Hesperia and 10.3 percent in Adelanto — Husing showed that job growth has been stronger in the High Desert than in the Inland Empire overall in the past couple of years.

The Inland Empire is outpacing the state in moderate-paying jobs, he said, and has created fewer lower-paying jobs than the state overall. That trend could help the High Desert in 2016 and beyond if the logistics, health care, manufacturing and construction sectors see improvement.

But whether or not they will could depend on how High Desert leaders address rental housing, and the myriad of problems that accompany it, Husing said.

Husing said rentals made up 51.4 percent of Barstow's housing stock in 2014, followed by Victorville at 45 percent, Adelanto at 44.5 percent, Apple Valley at 36.1 percent and Hesperia at 34.1 percent.

"Even the low numbers are one-third," Husing said. "That's way too high. And it's not apartments. That gets you to the issues of income and poverty."

Husing said the percentage of residents living on \$20,000 or less per year in the High Desert ranges from 19.5 percent in Apple Valley to 42.1 percent in Adelanto. He said the percentages of residents under 18 living in poverty, meanwhile, are even worse. They range from 25.2 percent in Victorville to 45.3 percent in Barstow to 51.3 percent in Adelanto.

One in three residents is on some form of public assistance in all High Desert communities. That figure is one in two in Adelanto and Barstow, Husing said.

Meanwhile, crime rates are rising. Husing said Barstow's number of violent crimes per 1,000 residents is 9.3, with Adelanto at 5.8. When it comes to property crime, Barstow (33.8) and Victorville (30) lead the region in property crimes per 1,000 residents.

"We need to stop pretending we don't have a problem up here," said Brady, who plans to run for re-election to the VVC Board of Trustees next November.

Husing said it starts with identifying where the rentals are.

"Step 2 is to put in serious licensing requirements to rent single-family homes," he said. "Not just a few bucks. There need to be (substantial) fees for licensing rentals, for external inspections and for internal inspections. The Police Department in San Bernardino began working with neighbors on the mass filing of small claims cases."

Husing said there are other, more sophisticated tools cities can use to discourage rentals and the problems that may come with having a high percentage of them.

Education is another key component in growing a healthy community and a workforce that can accommodate good-paying jobs. Both Alejandro and Wagner outlined steps educators at schools across the county and at Victor Valley College are taking to try to help move the region forward.

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