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Economist: Prepare for more growth

By: CHRIS BAGLEY - Staff Writer

PECHANGA INDIAN RESERVATION ----
 Western Riverside County provides bigger houses and better schools for the buck than most coastal communities, an imbalance that will continue to drive people, wealth and business inland for years to come, an economist told local civic and business leaders Thursday.

As any recent arrival to Riverside County can recognize, relatively moderate home prices have brought tens of thousands to the region, said economist Steve Frates, addressing a group of 200 at Pechanga Resort & Casino. And many who relocated did so because they wanted larger houses, pools, or a walk-in closet the size of a bedroom, and didn't want to pay more money to have those things.

"These factors and the quality of education are going to continue to drive the economic future of the Inland Empire," said Frates, a consultant at Claremont-McKenna College's Rose Institute who studies local governments' finances.

Citing test scores from inland and coastal students, Frates said inland districts compare well. While their performance isn't always up to the levels of coastal districts, it's nearly always high enough to continue attracting families with school-age children, he said, to nods from several listeners in the room. And as long as home prices per square foot remain well below coastal areas and schools remain fairly attractive, inland areas will continue to draw families, he said.

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The comments struck a chord with Nancy Wilson and Sondra Furtzaig, managers at Union Bank of California's Temecula branch. Even now, with many typical homes in Temecula selling for \$450,000 and \$500,000, many of their newest clients arrived for cheaper or larger homes, and for high-quality public schools, they said.

As populations shift, Frates said, inland governments should be aggressive in building more roads and other infrastructure, he said.

Frates, a Schwarzenegger appointee to a state panel on economic competitiveness, had plenty of praise for free markets and was skeptical of any government attempts to steer growth in the private sector. He bemoaned the spending priorities of powerful legislators from areas near San Francisco and Los Angeles, even as inland areas' populations grow much more quickly.

Frates was particularly dismissive of large cities' attempts to spend state funds on public transit while commuters in booming inland areas sit for hours in traffic.

Frates' comments were met with approval from several in the crowd, which drew heavily from chambers of commerce and management at local businesses.

"Trains have to go where you want to go," said Joan Sparkman, chairwoman of the Southwest California Legislative Council, the area's main business lobbying group. "I agree with him: What woman is going to jump on a train and go to a mall?"

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