

# Business is good in Central Oregon

By Sue Stafford  
Correspondent

CEO Roger Lee of Economic Development of Oregon (EDCO) was upbeat in his report to the joint workshop of the Sisters City Council and Deschutes County Commissioners on January 24.

The numbers he shared appeared to show mixed results.

“Led by the Bend-Redmond MSA (Deschutes County), economic results and rankings posted over the past 18 months have prompted EDCO to use this tagline in our current business development efforts: Central Oregon – America’s Top Performing Economy,” Lee told the assembled officials.

To back up that statement, Lee enumerated a number of favorable rankings received by Deschutes County cities including the Milken Institute designation for 2016 and 2017 as #1 Best Performing Small Cities and Forbes 2016 ranking as No. 1 Small Cities for Business and Career. Other designations included No. 2 fastest job growth in the U.S., No. 5 top 10 boomtowns, and No. 9 leading metro locations for 2017.

The challenge for EDCO is outbound lead generation, which Lee described as a needle-in-the-haystack search process. Simply put, it takes 2,000 prospecting contacts to generate 20-50 qualified leads. Those qualified leads may result in 5-10 pending

projects, which, in reality, may result in only one to three done deals.

The major part of EDCO’s work for the Central Oregon economy (80 percent of effort) is involved in attracting traded-sector businesses, helping them get started, and then assisting them in growing. These efforts help to purposefully create a thriving and diverse economy, which helps to protect against periods of economic downturn that can have a catastrophic effect in a “one-industry” economy.

The smaller part of EDCO’s mission (20 percent) is to work together with the cities, county, state, chambers of commerce, and dozens of other organizations to make Central Oregon a compelling and competitive place to operate businesses.

According to Lee, there are currently thousands of traded-sector jobs in the region going unfilled by existing companies. In an effort to change that, EDCO is working with businesses and educational institutions to provide the needed trained workforce. Partnering with COCC and OSU-Cascades is an important piece in that puzzle. With the growth of the campuses and their course offerings, more qualified graduates will be available for employment.

Central Oregon Youth Career Connect is a school-to-work program that has been operating for four years in Madras, Redmond, and Bend. They arrange internships for students in local businesses,

hopefully leading to permanent full-time employees with the necessary skills.

Other improvements in the business climate include the efforts of Fly Redmond, which operates in place of a port authority, to attract new and better air traffic service and destinations to better serve local businesses.

Whole industry development is encouraged by organizations such as Oregon Bioscience, Oregon Outdoor Alliance (with worldwide distribution of products), and the Technology Association of Oregon.

EDCO also promotes mentorship, capital, and resource contacts by working with Business Oregon, Oregon Entrepreneurs Network, Cascade Angels, and the BendVenture Conference.

“Our goal is to keep companies happy and local,” Lee remarked. “We are working on a focused effort to increase our lead generation in order to attract new businesses.

“We are on track for ‘done deals’ and far ahead of capital investment goals, but most definitely behind on jobs and payroll that will likely cause us to miss our strategic goals for those measures,” Lee said.

A topic not reported on was the status of the forgivable loan programs favored by EDCO. With lower than anticipated job and payroll numbers, are there businesses that have had to repay their loans because of not meeting agreed upon employment numbers?

According to the Portland State University Population Research Center, Deschutes County population is predicted to experience continued growth with 230,412 people by 2030 and 304,012 by 2050. Likewise, Sisters population is predicted to more than double by 2,050 to 5,793.

Sisters EDCO area director Caprielle Foote-Lewis provided an overview of economic activity within Sisters Country. Current challenges to economic development in Sisters include a small local/regional workforce, a low unemployment rate, a lack of affordable employee housing, and very low inventory of ready-to-go light industrial properties. According to Foote-Lewis, four potential projects were lost in 2016-17 due to that low inventory.

On the other hand, the underdeveloped light industrial area could also be considered an opportunity to provide space for development. The North Sisters Business Park with its residential component offers a live-work option for new businesses. The U. S. Forest Service land that currently houses the headquarters of the Sisters Ranger District is for sale and might offer a multitude of future development options.

There are no current plans for an expansion of the Sisters urban growth boundary, but if and when that should occur, more light industrial land could perhaps be a part of that expansion.

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