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### High hopes for High Desert



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08:00 AM PST on Friday, December 4, 2009

By CHRIS H. SIEROTY  
Contributing Writer

Although the High Desert has been hit harder by foreclosures and unemployment than many other regions of Inland Southern California, several analysts are optimistic the area's economy will bottom out soon before beginning its recovery.

"The economy is still losing some jobs," said Ron Barbieri, senior vice president of Lee & Associates in Victorville. "The good measure is that we are tracking with the rest of the Inland Empire and we are losing jobs at a decelerating rate. Employment losses are zeroing out and should start growing by the middle of next year."

San Bernardino County's unemployment rate was 14 percent at the end of October, according to the state's Employment Development Department.

Joseph Brady, president of The Bradco Cos. in Victorville, said the county's overall unemployment was near 19 percent because the state agency doesn't take into account those who have been laid off and are no longer looking for a job.

Despite some good news on existing home prices, economist John Husing said the High Desert's economy was still mired in recession entering the fourth quarter of 2009.

Story continues below



Special to The Business Press  
Newell Rubbermaid is one of several companies at the Southern California Logistics Airport.

He pointed to the continued decline of taxable sales, which are a major source of city revenue. In the fiscal year 2007-2008, San Bernardino County's sales fell by 5.3 percent to \$29.5 billion. While every major Inland city lost retail sales, the region's largest city, Victorville, reported sales of \$1.8 billion, ranking eighth in the two-county region.

The one bright spot in the region was the ongoing growth of Southern California Logistics Airport, said Brady. With construction on Dr Pepper Snapple Group's

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bottling hub and its neighboring Plastipak plant well underway, the former Air Force Base remains a hub of economic activity in the area.

"We estimate that the airport will generate over 1,000 jobs in the area," said Brian Parno, vice president of development at Stirling Capital Investments, the airport's master developer.

"We have Plastipak beginning operations over the next couple of months and the Dr Pepper Snapple plant should be at full production by March."

Dr Pepper Snapple is completing an 850,000-square-foot facility that will be its Western U.S. production and distribution site. The facility, which will occupy 53 acres, will produce as many as 40 million cases of beverages each year and is expected to employ 200 people. The company recently announced plans to hire the first 90 workers. Applications are available online at [www.drpeppersnapplegroup.com/careers](http://www.drpeppersnapplegroup.com/careers)

In September, the airport company announced it had secured a 231,185-square-foot lease with Plymouth, Mich.-based Plastipak Packaging Inc., a leading manufacturer of plastic packaging containers for many of the world's largest consumer product companies, to manufacture and distribute plastic bottles at its new SCLC facility.

They join a number of other companies that occupy industrial space at the airport, including Newell Rubbermaid, General Electric, Pratt & Whitney, FedEx, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, M&M/Mars, ConAgra Foods and Nutro Products Inc.

Businesses and public agencies in the High Desert that want to expand or renovate their facilities could have access to more than \$115 million in low-interest bonds through a county program approved last month by the Board of Supervisors. On Oct. 27, the board voted unanimously to create a countywide Recovery Zone to allow for the issuance of more than \$46 million in economic development bonds and some \$69 million in private facility bonds.

"They are really being proactive by approving this program," said Brady. "Some of this money will go to local projects that are shovel ready. I credit supervisors for thinking outside the box on this one. To me there is no downside."

The bond allocations can be used for projects in all cities and unincorporated areas of San Bernardino County. The federal program also provided allocations to cities with populations exceeding 100,000 people, including Victorville. Businesses that are a part of the allocation process, in a city, can also participate in the county program.

"An enterprise zone is extremely important because it provides incentives for businesses to locate in the (High Desert) and would be a significant incentive in our own business attraction efforts," said David Zook, chief of staff for 1st District Supervisor Brad Mitzelfelt.

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