

New executive of NNDA

NNBW, John Seelmeyer, 5/4/2009

Rob Hooper says there's nothing terribly complicated about his mission as executive director of Northern Nevada Development Authority: Create new jobs, and do it as quickly as possible.

But Hooper, who took the reins at NNDA after the resignation of Ron Weisinger in February, says it's going to take more than a handful of staff people at the economic development agency headquartered in Carson City to get workers back on the job.

"I'm a believer in Tom Sawyer-ism," he says. "We've got to get everyone to help paint the fence." Right now, the fence needs a lot of paint.

The unemployment rate stands at 11.3 percent in Carson City. In neighboring Lyon County — part of the region served by NNDA —the jobless rate tops 15 percent.

Storey County reports an unemployment rate of 12.2 percent, and Douglas County —the fourth of the counties served by NNDA —has a jobless rate of 11.2 percent.

Those numbers, Hooper says, place demands on the economic development agency to move quickly to attract new companies to Carson City and neighboring counties.

That's an urgency shared by the Nevada Commission on Economic Development, which in recent days began sending letters from Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons to fast-growing California companies that may be looking to expand.

NNDA, like other local development authorities in the state, will work to convert the leads generated by the state effort into new companies and new jobs.

At the same time, Hooper and other leaders of NNDA are thinking anew about the strengths of the region and trying to match those strengths with industrial users.

They're excited, for instance, about the potential of region as a possible location for clean rooms.

Anne Marie Dixon, one of the nation's top experts on clean rooms, is managing partner of Cleanroom Management Associates Inc. in Washoe Valley, and she's been educating Hooper about the region's potential.

"We have the right climate for clean rooms," the NNDA executive says. "When you're trying to control a space, humidity is your enemy."

Along with its dry climate, Carson City and neighboring counties provide relatively easy access to the technology companies of the San Francisco Bay area —companies that often rely on clean-room manufacturing.

Hooper says recruitment of clean rooms is particularly interesting because it cuts across a wide swath of industries —everything from nutraceuticals to aerospace manufacturing. That would provide further diversification of the region's economic base.

While NNDA develops plans to recruit new industries into the region, Hooper and his staff also are doing what they can to keep existing employers from leaving.

Often, he says, that amounts to making sure that executives who are considering moves out of the area get the information they need from schools, local government and other agencies.

And, longer term, NNDA needs to ensure that the business climate in northern Nevada encourages entrepreneurs to launch new companies to power the region's growth.

NNDA also needs to balance the need to develop jobs quickly with protection of the quality of life that's one of the region's drawing cards.

Quoting Douglas County Commissioner Chair Nancy McDermid, Hooper says, "We don't just need jobs. We need the right kind of jobs."

And that will vary from one community to another throughout the region served by NNDA. While he's been learning about the economic desires of communities in the region, Hooper also has been refocusing the organization.

One big change: No longer does NNDA have members. Instead, it has "investor partners."

Hooper explains: "Your benefit is the future, not the networking opportunity. We need to focus on jobs." Another change is development of industry-specific committees —commercial real estate, for instance, or banking —to advise and develop action plans for NNDA.

Those groups, which Hooper dubs "action advisory committees," also will play a key role in nominating members to the NNDA board.

"The community should be selecting the board," NNDA's executive says.

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