

Creating jobs is job 1 for Sacramento-area community leaders efletcher@sacbee.com

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As the six Roseville City Council candidates squared off in a September debate, the first audience question was a veritable softball: "What would your top priority in office be?"

One by one the six offered strikingly similar responses: Jobs, economic development/jobs, jobs, business attraction, get more business-friendly/bring jobs, economic diversity/jobs.

"If you're a politician, 'jobs' is the first word out of your mouth," said political analyst Gary Dietrich. "It's like 'It's the economy, stupid' in '92. But we have a new name for it: 'jobs.' "

In national polling, for more than a year unemployment/jobs has ranked No. 1 or No. 2 among Americans' concerns.

Closer to home, 89 percent of California voters described unemployment as a very serious problem, according to a Field Poll in October. The state unemployment rate has been stuck around the current rate of 12.4 percent since January.

Now comes the hard part, turning campaign rhetoric into real results.

"Sacramento is competing with the state of New York. Sacramento is competing with Texas. Sacramento is competing with Singapore," said Michael Faust, senior vice president at the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. "A lot of it goes right back to what the state is or is not doing."

But while state and federal governments can do a great deal to affect job creation and the overall business environment, a survey of business leaders and government officials pointed to three main things local leaders can do: remove red tape, reduce fees, utilize/build on local advantages.

"For local officials it's about creating a climate where economic development can occur," said Peter Detwiler, a consultant for the Senate Local Government Committee.

Local leaders should push to create a seamless process that allows entrepreneurs to more easily navigate government.

That means creating transparent, responsive and predictable processes, Faust said.

It would be good for the economy for cities to streamline government and make inspectors more accessible, said Joel Ayala, the director of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's newly created Office of Economic Development.

Roseville already boasts a business-friendly reputation. So the two victorious Roseville candidates – Susan Rohan and Tim Herman – should find plenty of support for initiatives that would create jobs.

The city recently announced its intention to create a nonprofit development corporation to help finance infill development.

"This is another example of the steps Roseville is taking to make sure we are at the front of the wave of economic recovery," said outgoing Mayor Gina Garbolino in her final state-of-the-city remarks.

The city of Davis recently authorized significant financial inducements to attract business. In one instance, the city gave a new Volkswagen dealership a \$1 million loan to upgrade and move into a building that housed a now-defunct Ford dealership.

The loan is forgivable if the business hits certain revenue marks, said Sarah Worley, the city's Economic Development Coordinator. If cars sell, the city expects to see a return between 100 percent and 300 percent.

"We weren't giving money away," Worley said. "We're expecting a substantial return."

With Davis vying to be the U.S. manufacturing location for Japanese machine tool manufacturer Mori Seiki Inc., officials agreed to cut the company's construction tax in half.

"This was something very important to the city," Worley said. "Especially right now when we need jobs, jobs, jobs."

Davis also has a leg up on other candidate cities because of its proximity to the University of California, Davis, and to a division of Mori Seiki in West Sacramento, she said.

City leaders "need to look at what they have and ... their competitive advantage," said the chamber's Faust. That might be cheaper power, access to college graduates or proximity to shipping.

Terry Connelly, dean of Ageno School of Business at Golden Gate University, said cities should eliminate weaknesses and build on strengths, like using city facilities for job training.

Locals need not worry about fixing the entire economy, Connelly said, just their own economy.

"Local decisions can have a very big effect on the small business culture as well as affecting a singular decision on one larger facility," he said.

Local elected officials would be mindful to remember the stakes, Dietrich said. "People do not buy cars and houses when they are without a job."

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