

City and county still growing

By Chuck Doud

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In spite of the national economic slowdown, Madera and Madera County continue to grow, both economically and in population.

The California Department of Finance lists Madera County as the state's seventh-fastest growing—at an annual rate of 1.78 percent—and that means the county is picking up about 3,000 new residents a year.

While residential construction has slowed, along with the housing market, commercial construction has kept moving.

In downtown Madera, two retail developments are under way on Gateway Drive, one at 9th Street and the other at 4th Street.

And, says Bobby Kahn, executive director of the Madera County Economic Development Commission, work continues apace on several projects in various stages of planning and/or construction.

“The Town Center, which is



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Bobby Kahn, executive director of the Madera County Economic Development Commission, says many different projects are humming along in Madera and its environs.

the Zelman Development project on the northeast corner of Avenue 17 and State Route 99, is still moving forward,” Kahn said. “We are hoping we will see off-site improvements start on that in the middle of this year. The city was able to

obtain a \$3 million grant from the Federal Economic Development Agency to help pay for some of the off-sites that are going to be required to build that center.

“We had somewhere in the area of \$13 million dollars

worth of off-sites that were going to develop that area.”

Kahn said about \$7 million of that was for infrastructure improvements for the development itself, and another \$6 million or so would be “oversized” at the same time to allow for future development.

Future developers in that neighborhood using the oversized infrastructure would pay Zelman back over time, Kahn said.

“So, that project is moving forward,” he said. “Target (the principal tenant so far) is still on board, and they have an array of national tenants who are still on board with it. And, we are negotiating with other national tenants to go there. So that project is ongoing. It may not seem like much is happening, but it is. Even though you don't see dust flying, there's still a lot of things going on. It's just one of these projects that's had so many things attached to it that had to be mitigated that it just has taken a

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long time.”

A lot of the delay was involved in environmental impact reports, annexation, zoning changes and other planning activities, he said.

“The other projects out there are still on hold, absent the casino,” he said.

The North Fork Rancheria has been working for several years to site a casino on Avenue 17, west of SR 99 on the north side of the freeway. But the project is stalled in red tape.

A shopping center planned for the southeast corner of the Avenue 17-SR 99 intersection, across the road from the Zelman project, has been shelved for the time being.

“The Gagliardi property on the south side of 17 and 99 was under option by another developer,” Kahn said, “and they have forfeited their option, so the property has now reverted back to the Gagliardis, and is now back on the market.”

He said another project, called the Promenade, on the west side of the freeway on property adjacent to the cas-

ino site, also has been delayed.

The casino, however, remains a going project, Kahn said.

“The casino is still moving forward,” he said. “The environmental impact study, a federal document, has been completed and is back with the Department of the Interior, and the documents have been back there several months. They are being reviewed.”

The study is necessary before the land on which the casino would be built can be put into trust for the North Fork Rancheria. Once it is in trust, the tribe can start building, he said.

“They are waiting for the Department of the Interior to say, ‘Yes, we will take that into trust for you,’ and then once that happens, they can move forward with — basically — construction. Although there is a lot of work going on with that project, the wheels have basically ground to a halt until the Department of the Interior makes a decision.”

Kahn said the two shopping center projects on hold probably would come out of mothballs when the casino opens.

• Cool Hand Luke’s restaurant on Cleveland Avenue at

the Fairgrounds is due to open soon. “They’re very excited about the Madera community,” he said.

• The Black Bear Restaurant will be on Almond Street east of SR 99, adjacent to Marriott Springhill Suites and across the street from Madera Community Hospital. Although not yet open, the restaurant is recruiting employees.

• Marriott Springhill Suites Hotel, on Almond Avenue, could open as soon as the end of this month or next, Kahn said.

Both the Black Bear and Marriott Springhill Suites are projects of Berry Construction, as is a nearly completed, yet-to-open restaurant on Avenue 16 at its intersection with SR 99, across the street from Starbucks and next door to the new Valero gasoline station, which also was a Berry project.

• The City of Madera youth center remains under construction at 5th and Flume streets, with completion scheduled for later this year.

• The city also is getting ready to break ground on two road projects — the realignment of the intersection of Madera Avenue, Olive Av-

enue and SR 99, and the Ellis Street overpass, which will link the city’s northeast and northwest sides.

The hotel construction boomlet isn’t over yet, Kahn said.

“If your destination point is not Fresno, Fresno really doesn’t offer much in the way of off-highway hotels along the 99,” said Kahn. “I think they’re picking up on that.”

Kahn said a Comfort Suites was being planned for the Avenue 17-SR 99 area, to join the Hampton Inn, which opened last year near the airport.

Kahn said two new industrial plants also would be ready to open soon: Nemat Management, a high-tech machining and engineering company, and Innovative Rotational Molding, a manufacturer of large plastic tanks for the agricultural industry.

He said the county is well positioned to keep growing when the economic slump ends.

“These setbacks are part of the cycle,” he said. “When we reach the fourth quarter of this year, I think we’ll start seeing a leveling out, and we’ll see the market correcting itself.”