



REGION: Economic future of area still wears a uniform

March Field emerging as business hub for the county

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For western Riverside County, the economic future more than ever appears destined to revolve around a 2-foot-thick slab of concrete that extends for 13,300 feet.

That's the main runway at March Air Reserve Base.

"It is the epicenter for manufacturing, assembly and distribution," said Tom Freeman, commissioner of the county's Office of Foreign Trade.

That's perhaps a bit more prediction than declaration, but Freeman is working furiously to lock up deals with a Chinese company that wants to produce household goods and a Korean company that wants to build electric cars. Both plants probably would be along the I-215 south of the base.

Developing the area surrounding the reserve base with manufacturers and distributors would help strengthen the area economy, said Mason Gaffney, a UC Riverside economics professor.

"We have surplus of labor and shortage of capital," he said.

Supervisor Jeff Stone is especially enthusiastic about the potential for electric-car manufacture.

"We can be the new Detroit," Stone said. "It's very exciting."

Diversifying the area's economy is atop everyone's priority list as the county tries to emerge from a bad bet on the housing boom and find work for the estimated 128,300 jobless in the county.

But how? And where?

After some bumps and reversals, the future looks like March.

When March opened in 1918, little but sage and scrub obscured the vistas. When the Air Force converted the base to reserve status in 1993, it opened the gates for development and joint use of the facility.

Planners envisioned cargo and eventually passenger service as part of a broad repurposing of the area from its Cold War duty as a home for nuclear-armed bombers. When DHL cargo began service at March in 2005, the future of March seemed to be secure in aviation. Planners talked of a busy commercial airport.

Nearby residents opposed that idea, however, and the commercial airport dream foundered late last year when United Parcel Service acquired DHL's operations in the United States.

The last DHL flight on the runway took off just before Christmas.

Now though, March will flex its power in another way, says David Stewart, dean of the graduate school of management at UC Riverside.

"No question March will be built out," he said, noting that it lies at the confluence of a technology corridor that extends east along the 210 freeway from CalTech in Pasadena and a biotechnology corridor extending north from San Diego along Interstate 15.

"Twenty years from now, we'll see a radically changed landscape around March and along the 215," Stewart said, predicting the region will become a center for healthcare, advanced technology and especially alternative energy, given the area's abundance of sun and wind.

Such a diversified center will give the region a much stronger and more resilient economy than one based on building houses for more and more people who clog Interstate 15 Highway 91 to drive west and south to jobs in San Diego, Orange and Los Angeles counties.

Supervisor Marion Ashley, whose district includes adjacent Moreno Valley and Perris, said he envisions 20,000 new jobs created at March over the next 10 to 15 years. "We're just getting started," he said.

Planners also are reformulating what March itself will become.

Hopes for extensive cargo and passenger service have been replaced with a plan to lure a mix of business and private aircraft to March, a proposal that the Air Force approves, says Lori Stone, executive director of the March Joint Power Authority, which governs the reuse of parts of the base. (Stone is unrelated to Supervisor Jeff Stone.)

The Air Force has limited the civilian flights to 57 operations a day, with each landing and takeoff counting as one operation. By comparison, Ontario International Airport has about 10 times that many daily operations.

A mix of businesses centered at the base is more agreeable to people who live around March and who opposed development of a commercial airport there.

What will accelerate the development and attraction of March as a business hub will be the development of the nearby Meridian business park, Stone says. Plans are being developed now for the completion of a 1,290-acre site that straddles Van Buren Boulevard, which intersects Interstate 215 near the March Field Museum. About 3.5 million square feet of what is called the North Campus of the business park already is complete. Among the tenants: Fresh & Easy grocers and Kia auto parts.

In all, companies on the North Campus employ about 1,600 people ---- one-tenth of the employment forecast when both campuses are complete in 2025.

Helping to lure businesses: About 2,400 acres around the airfield is designated as a Foreign Trade Zone, which means manufacturers who locate in the zone can get breaks on taxes, tariffs and import fees. At March, most of the North Campus falls into the foreign trade zone; sectors on both sides of the southeast corner of the runways also are included in the zone.

About 3,500 companies around the nation now are in such trade zones. The county's other zone is near the Palm Springs International Airport.

As does Supervisor Ashley, Lori Stone envisions not only thousands of jobs created at Meridian, but thousands more on the northeast corner of the base in what will be a 68-acre medical park, which she says could complement the medical school planned for the UC Riverside campus.

"The hope is that March will become the business hub of the county," she said. "The idea is to create jobs and keep people closer to home."

That's more than merely self-interest.

In its most recent regional report, the Southern California Association of Governments says promotion of local industries is critical if freeway congestion is to be contained, air quality gains maintained and the discharge of global-warming gases reduced.

SCAG notes a compelling, immediate economic reason to develop local industries: Because of our dependence on foreign energy sources, increases in fuel prices could have severe consequences to agriculture, industry and transportation, the report says.