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Why Inland Empire matters in bad times

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Like economies all across the country, Southern California has taken a big hit.

Between the sub-prime mortgage fiasco, the slumping housing market and mounting prices for gas and food, times are tough. That's why the Inland Empire matters. Even with the slowing economy, the IE is where any real substantial growth is occurring and where growth will continue to occur in Southern California for at least the next decade.

Keep in mind that the IE is more than one-sixth of California's land mass and is roughly the same size as the state of Virginia. If it were a state it would be the 25th largest in terms of the number of people who live here. It's larger than Oregon and just slightly smaller than South Carolina. Simply put, it is a place of amazing growth, and it's only going to continue to grow. (I am indebted to a recent report on the IE by the Public Policy Institute of California for much of the background here.)

By 2015, the PPIC reports that the IE will have nearly 5 million residents. The biggest part of that population growth comes from the flow of internal migration. Folks from Orange County and San Diego County are moving to the IE because of its relatively affordable housing. More than half of all internal migrants are migrating in from L.A. County.

Besides the lower housing costs, people are drawn by the job growth. While a lot of the incoming residents may work in the area, many others are commuting daily to jobs in the coastal areas. These coastal commuters also have higher levels of income and education. Interestingly, at one time, the IE had poverty rates higher than the rest of the nation and the state. But, due to job and population growth, poverty rates have declined and are now on par with the rest of the U.S. and California.

There's also a shift in the racial and ethnic composition

of the area. By 2015, Latinos will be the majority in the IE (at 51.2 percent). Interestingly, the growth of the Latino population and to a certain extent, the growth of the Asian population, will not affect the influence of the white community. The PPIC found that even with higher numbers of Latinos and Asians, whites would still be 50 percent of all voters although they would be only 32.1 percent of all residents. Whites have a higher inclination to vote than other groups, which means that, in effect, they will continue to be the majority of voters.

Unlike other areas in California, the number of young children will continue to grow which means the number of school-age children will increase. People are moving to the IE to raise their families due to the lower cost of housing.

As an educator, it is clear to me that education will play a big role in the development of the IE. Employers in the region are already demanding

workers with higher skills and educational levels. As a whole, the region's educational levels will remain about the same and will not catch up with the high school graduation and college graduation levels in the rest of the state. Even with this, the IE is seeing a shift within several major industries demanding more workers with higher levels of education.

For all the good news, the IE is facing some real challenges. I remember something that Jim Collins, the celebrated author of "Good to Great," once said, "Economic growth and power are the means, not the definition, of a great nation." As we look at the growth in the IE, we also have to make sure we confront the challenges. We don't want to be blinded by the growth itself and not recognize that there is more to quality of life than jobs and affordable housing.

The first big challenge is to find a way to improve education and training for low-skilled workers.

Basically, this means improving high school graduation rates throughout the IE. There are some generally agreed-upon strategies. We need to do things as simple as getting middle school students ready for high school; strengthen the transition from the seventh and eighth grades to ninth grade; make sure that all high school students have completed a solid academic core. Beyond that, we need to encourage partnerships between employers, colleges and high school students so they can learn high-level technical skills. One practice that has worked in many school districts is to set up teams of district and state leaders to help low-performing high schools.

Another challenge is to make sure that all citizens participate fully in the democratic process. The Latino and Asian communities need to be encouraged to vote in accordance with their numbers. In that way, the policies that will be shaped during the next decade will include the input of all. The

future of the region depends on full civic participation. And, it's important because as the IE goes so goes the surrounding areas beyond Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The way growth is managed in the IE will affect the economies of Orange, San Diego and Los Angeles Counties.

The IE matters. It's a vast slice of California geography and smart and humane management of its astounding growth will benefit all of us. The policymakers in the IE have a critical opportunity to shape growth and the future. As the fastest growing region of a fast-growing state that has long pioneered much of what is good about America, the Inland Empire has the chance to emerge, if we do things right, as one of the next great frontiers in our country - in terms of the economy, land-use, and a sense of community.

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