

## **Summit: Training, loans key to more Valley jobs**

Written by Heather Halsey

Thursday, 10 December 2009 19:12

Nearly every link of the economic chain was present to discuss employment and growth at Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin's community job summit Thursday afternoon.

Topics ranged from job training to small business funding as those in attendance shared their observations and opinions about how to invigorate the local economy, where Fresno County's unemployment spiked to 15.8 percent in October.

Swearengin said specific recommendations from the summit will be sent to Washington where they could become part of an immediate set of economic stimulus proposals.

The recommendations are expected to include a request for greater funding for job training and education programs in fields that are lacking local, qualified workers.

Education was also a hot topic at the White House jobs forum that Swearengin attended last week. She said access to risk capital and creating public infrastructure that supports economic growth also dominated the discussions.

"The way to insulate our economy ... and ourselves from the big swings is to educate and train our workforce," Swearengin said. "That's exactly what Austin's done, that's what Boston's done, San Diego and San Jose."

Representatives from several staffing companies echoed Swearengin's opinion at the local summit including Carol White, branch manager for The Plus Group, Inc.

"We're having a lot of candidates apply, a lot of which are not qualified candidates," White said.

Recommendations to pump funds back into small businesses through the U.S. Small Business Administration loan programs are also a probability as bankers and business owners agreed it was a necessity.

"In some cases we feel a little bit like a wishbone in that we've got the regulators on one side being very cautious in what they want banks to do and being very critical," said Daniel Doyle, president and CEO of Central Valley Community Bank. "But on the other side certainly a strong interest as a community bank we want to support our local communities and provide the credit that they need."

Doyle said that existing customers are decreasing debt by paying down loans rather than increasing debt, which frees up lending capital to other businesses. However, many of his clients who would like to borrow are too high of a risk.

Scott Garner is a small business owner who falls into the latter category. He started Garner Tree Services five years ago and has weathered the economic storm thus far, but has found it impossible to obtain funding to expand and hire more employees.

"So what happens to us in all this, where is the little bit that helps us to get to the next level?" Garner said.

Another small business owner, Kirby Dickson of California Valley Construction, has hired six employees in the last year without the help of any stimulus funds. He said that he feels he could have used federal funds much more wisely than some of the bailouts that were dispersed.

"If we do hire 70 percent of the people in this country ... President Obama should trust the people that are out there working every day in providing for their communities and their families," Dickson said.

At the closing of the meeting at 5 p.m. it was clear that discussions could have continued late into the evening, although answers still could have remained elusive as to exactly how the local economy can be stimulated.

However, a list of recommendations based on the discussions will be released from Swearengin's office in the next few days. Subsequently they could also be discussed in Washington by President Obama's senior economic team.