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Wanted: A way to nourish arts

By Jim Wasserman - Bee Staff Writer

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With the notion that places hailed for their quality of life are good places to do business, Sacramento-area leaders are assessing how to indirectly spur job growth by building up sports, arts and cultural amenities.

Experts in keeping and growing jobs say most executives factor a region's perceived quality into relocation decisions. Young, mobile professionals, too, often choose first where they want to live, then where to land work.

"There is great economic benefit in being a great place," said Jim Williams, owner of a Roseville architectural firm, during a Friday forum sponsored by the Sacramento council of the Urban Land Institute, a national arm of the development and real estate industry.

Williams chairs a "civic amenities" crusade for a regional business initiative called Partnership for Prosperity. The 18-month-old initiative aims to sharpen the Sacramento economy's competitive edge and override regional liabilities of traffic congestion and high housing costs.

Perceptions of Sacramento, indeed, have tumbled in the 2007 edition of "Cities Ranked and Rated," by noted city ranker Burt Sperling. After placing the capital region 85th nationally for quality of life in 2004, Sperling dropped it to 183 this year. He cited stronger negatives in his new edition, including a rising cost of living, heavy traffic and "endless developments of tightly-packed, cookie-cutter homes."

While the link between quality of life and job growth is an old debate in the capital region and elsewhere, local business and political leaders say they are pursuing it anew. Friday's forum, at Memorial Auditorium in Sacramento, tapped authorities in Denver and Phoenix for their strategies.

The forum also clearly focused on potential for a slight sales tax increase to add muscle to the arts, culture and sports in the Sacramento area, including the suburbs. Money might also help build signature parks and riverfront attractions or expand the Sacramento Zoo.

Organizers repeatedly stressed their push is not about an arena for the Sacramento Kings.

"This effort is not about a new arena for the region, though that is part of the package of amenities," Williams said.

The forum came 11 months after Sacramento County voters overwhelmingly rejected a proposed quarter-cent sales tax increase to spend \$600 million on a Kings arena and \$600 million more on community quality-of-life projects throughout the county.

Denver pollster and political consultant Floyd Ciruli told the 125 people attending the forum that the vote -- only 28 percent supported the tax -- is clearly a hindrance for their efforts.

"To some extent you need to reframe that dialogue and make a new start," he said.

Denver has long had a one-tenth of 1 percent sales tax for cultural facilities, including art museums, botanical gardens and the city zoo. This year it's expected to raise \$40 million for an eight-county metro area of 3 million people.

Phoenix, too, is trying to put a sales tax vote to Maricopa County voters. But so far the Arizona Legislature has blocked it from asking the county to put it on the ballot.

Myra Millinger, president and chief executive officer of the Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, said the group hopes eventually to raise \$50 million a year for the arts and culture. She called it an economic development tool.

"We did a survey that showed 75 percent of executives at Fortune 500 companies said a vibrant arts and culture scene was a factor in relocations," she said. "Only 26 percent thought Phoenix had it."

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