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Education key to prosperity, say former astronaut, lieutenant governor

By TIFFANY STECKER

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Education and economic prosperity were inextricably linked at Friday's South County Economic Development Council's annual economic summit.

The summit consisted of panel discussions, coupled with a luncheon keynote addresses given by Lt. Gov. John Garamendi and former NASA astronaut Sally Ride.

Ride, renown as the first American woman ever to venture into space and a professor at the University of California, San Diego, is founder of Sally Ride Science, an organization dedicated to involve more young girls in science and encourage them to pursue careers in scientific fields.

Ride pointed to Chula Vista's future Gas Technology Institute, an energy research center that was approved last year, as a potential partner for NASA's research in energy usage and efficiency.

"Coincidentally, I think the Gas Technology Institute in Chula Vista is probably going to be fairly well-positioned to work on some of these technologies with (Jet Propulsion Laboratory)," she said, segueing quickly in her next topic of discussion.

"The major element in positioning this region, roughly speaking, to participate in the development of the future direction space program is developing a technically trained workforce," she said.

Ride continued to speak on the discrepancy of women interested in science, starting in middle school.

"Starting in fifth grade, sixth grade, seventh grade, we actually start losing both boys and girls (who are interested in science) in droves, but we lose girls in larger numbers than boys," she said. "The reasons why we lose both boys and girls, but more girls than boys, are primarily societal.

"It's the image our culture bombards on these kids," she added, pointed to the "geeky" image attached to interest in science and math.

Sally Ride Science attracts South Bay students to its programs across the county, and is starting to talk about instituting programs with the South Bay school districts. While the organization works with schools nationally, its location by UCSD provides an easy reach for South County students.

Garamendi lambasted the state's educational system, blaming poor educational planning and administration as a significant detriment to the economy.

"We are falling off the power curve in California," he said, recounting that the public education system in the state was once among the best in the nation.

“(We have) a policy in which we tax students to go to school,” he added. “We now force the burden of education on the students, and that slams the door on low-income and moderate-income students who have the intelligence, who have the capability, who have the knowledge and the preparation to attend higher education.”

Garamendi suggested the state’s investment in a future qualified work force would be the best move to help California’s economy — an investment in highly skilled professions to combat a slowing economy.

“(It’s) crucial that that college integrate itself in the business community and the business community do the same,” he said. “Out of that relationship will come the skilled workers you need in your employment.”

After years of being neglected as a vibrant economic center, South County EDC president and CEO Cindy Gompper-Graves said businesses and investors are finally waking up to the opportunities provided by the border region.

“We’ve been waiting for the community to recognize what South County has to offer,” she said. “We’re now being recognized and, as a result, it’s getting business.

“We have some of the last land available that can afford campuses,” she continued. “We are on the cusp of having a four-year university, I think people are starting to pay attention.”