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'06 great year for businesses

6,000 jobs created last year in S.J. County

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By **Bruce Spence**
Record Staff Writer
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STOCKTON - The San Joaquin Partnership reported another productive year attracting businesses to San Joaquin County as well as retaining them. The group was involved in 29 business projects that meant the creation of nearly 6,000 jobs last year.

At its annual report meeting Tuesday morning, featured speaker Sunne Wright McPeak, chief executive officer of the newly created California Emerging Technology Fund, outlined the fund's mission to provide broadband access to rural areas in the state.

Partnership Chairman Robert Wheeler, plant manager for General Mills in Lodi, called 2006 perhaps the best year ever for the group, which, since its 1992 launch, has helped generate 229 business projects and more than 46,000 jobs.

He pointed out that in the past five years, projects have been moving away from logistics businesses and toward higher-paying manufacturing enterprises. For example, new manufacturing concerns accounted for more than half the projects last year, while logistics accounted for about 30 percent.

This year is off to a good start for new projects, Wheeler said, but there are challenges, such as a low 4 percent vacancy rate for high-cube space; rising fees and costs; and a drop in fully entitled development sites.

Still, he said, the county has a good work force, training facilities and remains a fairly affordable area for businesses, he said.

McPeak served three years in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's cabinet as secretary of the state Business Transportation and Housing Agency. In November, she was named to head the technology fund, which aims to develop infrastructure for broadband technologies.

The money results from the mergers of SBC/AT&T and Verizon/MCI. The California Public Utilities Commission ordered SBC/AT&T to commit \$45 million and Verizon/MCI to commit \$15 million over five years to the fund.

McPeak said giving communities Internet access will help government improve service. Getting people online will get them out of lines and able to access services easier and faster, she said.

Contact reporter Bruce Spence at (209) 943-8581 or bspence@recordnet.com.

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