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# INLAND: Fate of Ontario airport may be decided in 2014



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A passenger prepares to head up stairs to his boarding gate in a nearly empty Ontario International Airport in May 2012.

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FROM STAFF REPORTS | December 30, 2013; 12:01 AM

ONTARIO

Ontario International's future at stake in 2014

After losing passengers for the sixth year in a row, in 2014 Ontario International Airport has a glimmer of hope for

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reversing its downward spiral.

Los Angeles, which owns the airport, and Ontario agreed to suspend a legal battle over control of the airport and try to settle out of court.

The Inland airport's passenger count has fallen 46 percent since 2007, from 7.2 million to fewer than 4 million in 2013 – the lowest number since 1985 when the region's population was half the size it is today.

Ontario officials say if the decline isn't halted soon, Ontario International Airport could be mothballed.

Contributing to Ontario International's decline is that for airlines, it's the most expensive airport in Southern California.

Some airlines have left, others sharply cut operations. Daily departures were slashed from 135 in 2007 to 60 in 2013, nonstop destinations from 36 to 14.

If it can regain control, Ontario hopes to offer airlines incentives to restore flights and residents incentives to book travel at the airport, as other secondary airports such as Oakland and Orange County's John Wayne do.

Last month, a judge agreed to give Los Angeles and Ontario until Jan. 31 to work on an out-of-court settlement.

If the last-ditch effort fails, the parties will be back in court Feb. 5.

Ontario's suit alleges breach of contract, breach of faith and breach of fiduciary duty and accuses LA of failing to make legitimate efforts to attract and retain regular, scheduled airline service at Ontario.

--CASSIE MACDUFF

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## RIVERSIDE

County hospital's finances need corrective surgery

Riverside County's hospital will start 2014 with a financial hemorrhage that will require tens of millions of dollars in surgery.

In the past few years, Riverside County Regional Medical Center in Moreno Valley went from having millions in the bank to losing \$1 million a week and staring at a potential shortfall of \$50 million when the fiscal year ends in June.

That shortfall threatens to consume money needed for other public services at a time when the county still is recovering from the Great Recession and faces massive financial commitments for employee raises and new jail space. The hospital is the only health care option for many of the county's poorest people.

Former hospital CEO Doug Bagley blamed the losses on reductions in county financial support, a lack of adequate reimbursement for treating jail inmates and other issues. A private health-care consultant found the potential to improve the hospital's bottom line by as much as \$65 million annually.

Bagley and two top hospital executives have left their jobs and the county Board of Supervisors

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agreed to a contract worth at least \$23 million with the consultant, Huron Healthcare, to turn things around. Lowell Johnson, who built a career on fixing troubled hospitals, is getting \$46,000 a month to guide the recovery.

Huron also is supposed to develop a long-range vision that could see the hospital partnering with other health-care providers.

--JEFF HORSEMAN

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## REGION

Freeway construction to continue

There will be an addition to familiar Inland-area freeway projects in 2014 when the \$1.3-billion Highway 91 Corridor Improvement Project begins.

Work on a 24-mile extension of rail service for the Metrolink 91 line from downtown Riverside to Perris also will begin in 2014.

The freeway corridor project will add two express-toll lanes and a general-use lane in each direction on an eight-mile stretch of the freeway between the Orange County line and Interstate 15 in Corona. Planners say it will ease the "Corona crawl" so unhappily familiar to commuters.

Changes will start in January with pavement restriping.

The project will add six lanes to Highway 91. Thirteen bridges will be widened, two will be replaced and eight will be added. Construction is forecast for completion in 2017.

The \$24.3 million Metrolink project will add four stations along its route through Riverside, Moreno Valley and Perris. Other work includes new railroad tracks or rehabilitation of existing tracks. Service should begin in late 2015.

The Highway 91 corridor project will join a constellation of construction work along Highway 91 through Riverside and on to Interstate 215 north toward San Bernardino.

In full force along Highway 91 is the \$232 million HOV Project, widening six miles of the freeway between Adams Street and the 60/91/215 interchange north of downtown Riverside. The project, which should be completed in 2014, will add a diamond lane in each direction.

Work continues along the I-215 in San Bernardino County to build one HOV lane in each direction from the Riverside County project to Orange Show Road in San Bernardino. The \$178 million project is forecast for 2015 completion.

Also ongoing:

--The I-215 Central Project, \$123.5 million, adding one lane in each direction for 12.5 miles between Nuevo Road in Perris and Scott Road in Menifee. Completion: 2015.

--The 60-215 East Junction Project, \$43 million, adding two HOV direct connectors between the Highway 60 westbound HOV lane in Moreno Valley and the Highway 60-Interstate 215 eastbound HOV lane. Completion: Summer 2014.

--Devore Interchange redesign, \$324.2 million, to eliminate a bottleneck where Interstates 215 and 15 merge. Completion: Mid-2016.

Will jobs keep coming in 2014?

A recent economic forecast put Inland Southern California's long-range economy into a context few people wanted to hear: The Great Recession will essentially amount to a lost decade.

That said, it is expected that 2014 will be another building-block year as the economy continues to repair itself. The number of jobs out there for Riverside and San Bernardino county residents still is well below where it was during the economic peak of 2006, but jobs are coming back.

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There were 1.3 million people collecting paychecks in the two-county area in December 2006. The best estimates using U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show the Inland Empire somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 jobs away from recapturing that kind of prosperity.

Los Angeles-based Beacon Economics, in a forecast released about two months ago, said the Inland area is on track to make up about 30,000 of those jobs in 2014. That could lower the region's unemployment level from its current 9.4 percent to 8.85 percent by the end of the year.

Beacon Economics anticipates growth in both personal income and taxable sales to be in the 5 percent to 6 percent range.

Where will these people be working? There is a lot that must be played out, but a lot of developers have filed building permits so the construction industry could be a player. And, a lot of people who didn't have health insurance now do. So medical professionals could be in demand.

But as far as getting back to pre-recession levels, Beacon Economics predicts we won't see to 1.3 million jobs until the first quarter of 2017, so calling it a lost decade might be more than just a cliché.

--JACK KATZANEK

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Iconic solar project to go online

It's hard to miss BrightSource Energy's solar power plant when traveling to or from Las Vegas, especially if testing is in progress — the 750-foot-tall towers glow white-hot when thousands of mirrors focus the sun's energy on them to create electricity.

Construction of the 5.6-square-mile complex off Interstate 15 in eastern San Bernardino County, near Primm, Nevada, is nearly complete. It's expected to begin feeding power into the grid early in the new year.

It's one of several commercial-scale solar projects in Riverside and San Bernardino counties that benefited from President Barack Obama's recession-era spending on renewable energy.

Although the BrightSource project, in the Ivanpah Valley, uses the solar energy as a clean source of power, questions linger about the toll those white-hot towers will take on wildlife.

In operation, each tower is enveloped in heat so intense that it burns birds on the wing.

In October, 52 birds were found dead in or near the solar towers after tests on the \$2.1 billion system. The carcasses appeared to have been burned when the birds flew into the heat zones.

Earlier this month, California Energy Commission officials recommended denial of a similar project proposed by BrightSource near Desert Center in Riverside County because of the bird deaths, among other issues.

The company has since been granted time to gather more data about bird deaths at Ivanpah before a final decision is made on the Riverside County endeavor, called the Palen project.

Birds aren't the only environmental issue.

Construction of the mirror arrays, towers and access roads at Ivanpah displaced more than 100 desert tortoises, a species threatened with extinction. Initial environmental reviews had suggested only a few of the reptiles would be affected.

On the positive side, the project is expected to help reduce global warming by producing enough solar-generated electricity for 140,000 homes, according to a company estimate.

— DAVID DANIELSKI

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Promoting mountain tourism in 2014

Last July, the Mountain Fire scorched 43 square miles of the San Jacinto and led to the four-day evacuation of the town of Idyllwild. The fire began July 15 and raged for more than a week.

On Aug. 7, the Silver Fire erupted and raced toward the San Jacinto Mountains communities of Twin Pines and Poppet Flat. It blackened 32 square miles.

Together, the fires destroyed more than 71 structures, 33 of which were homes.

Equally as bad, they left Southern Californians with the mistaken idea that Idyllwild had been destroyed, or that the recreation areas around the mountain were so badly damaged it wasn't worth the trip to visit them.

Not so, says a group of business people who have gotten together to promote the mountain community and bring the tourists back in 2014.

They want to "get the word out that Idyllwild didn't burn and it's a beautiful place," said Phyllis Mueller, who signs email with the title chief of staff for the Office of Mayor.

In keeping with the spirit of the quirky town, the mayor is Maximus Mighty-Dog Mueller II, a golden retriever being raised by Mueller and her husband Glenn Warren.

Max II is carrying on the tradition forged by the first Max, a golden retriever who won the title in 2012 in a fundraising contest run by the Animal Rescue Friends of Idyllwild group.

After the couple's first Max died earlier this year, they acquired purebred goldens Max II and two deputy mayors, Mikey and Mitzi. They will serve out Max's term through June 2014.

Chief among their duties is to boost tourism in the visitor-dependent community. As far as Mueller is concerned, last summer's fires are in the past and she is looking ahead.

"I definitely have ideas" for promoting the area, Mueller said.

Max II and the deputy mayors attract fans with cameras wherever they go, and they are out and about in Idyllwild almost every day, for everything from special events to every day errands.

"As the 'mayors,' we're constantly promoting Idyllwild," Mueller said.

— GAIL WESSON

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