

EXECUTIVE Q&A

James Sly, CEO, East County EDC

It May Be Time for Companies to Take a New Look at East County

■ By RAY HUARD

James Sly was recently named CEO of the **San Diego East County Economic Development Council**.

Sly, 34, is a Santee native and a graduate of **West Hills High School, Grossmont College** and **San Diego State University** with a degree in business administration.

He also completed a nonprofit management development program at the **Harvard Business School**.

Q: Is there much development going on in East County and what do you see happening?

A: My big strategic priority, at least in the immediate future, is trying to attract meaningful employment to East County. Historically, we've been a real center for manufacturing and professional services and health care and I'm trying to attract some of those better paying jobs that are going to lead to a high quality of life. Our goal really is to attract some of those players to East County. SDAG released a study two years ago that approximately 72% of our workforce leaves every morning to go work someplace outside of East County then they come back in the afternoon. That causes a lot of traffic issues, it affects the quality of life. Our goal is to attract some of those higher paying jobs, some of those more meaningful employment opportunities out here so that the workers that live out here can also work out here and invest in some of their communities.

Q: How do you go about doing that?

A: Part of it is identifying our inventory of available land and identifying how we can make East County palatable and reliable for some of these businesses that are looking to expand or relocate. The second, at least in my opinion, is identifying where they work and approaching those employers and making a pitch that the next time they look at opening another annex or expanding that they should consider East County. I think we have some competitive advantages here both in terms of our infrastructure, our workforce. Some of our community amenities make East County in my opinion the best region in San Diego.

Q: Most of the new development seems to be going along the coast and in South County in Otay Mesa. Do you see any big development projects coming to East County?

A: The myth is that we don't have a lot of open and available land here. I do think we do have a good inventory of available land but more importantly, we've got a ton of land that could be put to better use. If you're looking at how we redeveloped and repurposed our land, there's a lot of commercial and office and industrial space that right now is just sort of being used without being used meaningfully.

Q: What is East County's reputation?

A: It depends on the context we're talking about, but I think from a community perspective, I know a lot of people move out to East County because you can get a bigger house, the communities are largely very safe and the education systems are very strong and robust, whether you're talking about the elementary, high school or community college systems. From a family and community perspective, I think East County has a great reputation. If we're talking about how it's perceived by the rest of the county, I think some people haven't been out in a long

time and they probably perceive East County as still a very rural community and that's really not the case anymore. That El Cajon (Interstate 8) corridor is one of the most heavily trafficked and trucked transportation corridors in the country. The flow of goods into the rest of California, in many instances into the rest of the country comes down that freeway through East County. One of the pitches we've made in the past about attracting employers here is that they've got centrally located, really robust arteries that can get them anywhere.

Q: What does East County have that people don't know about?

A: I think people would be surprised by that availability of workforce. I think when people think of East County, they probably don't think of engineers, doctors or professional service providers. The truth is a lot of



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those people reside here and those are the people that are supplying the workforce for employers they'd recognize in the rest of the region. I think they'd be surprised by the level of development that's come up. We're not downtown or some of that stuff you've seen right across the border but for me, 30 years has made quite a difference in the landscape and the shape of these communities.

Q: Why did you decide to stay in East County?

A: For me, I have a 13-year-old daughter so a big question mark was where was she going to go to school. The school districts, especially in Santee and other parts of East County are really strong and really robust. The other driver was if you think of that white picket fence, that suburban lifestyle, it's hard to find a place that better exemplifies that than East County.

Q For a long time, East County was considered as bedroom community, is it still?

A: I would still describe it as a live-in community instead of a work-in community. People love to shop out here, they love to vacation here and use our trails and parks, natural amenities but when it comes to working or a lot of entertaining, they probably travel elsewhere. I don't know that we have an area like a North Park or a Little Italy or a Gaslamp District out in East County that really exemplifies entertainment although some of our city partners are trying to change that.

Q: Would you see East County ever becoming like UTC or Sorrento Valley?

A: I think that there are some conversations on the table now around how these cities in East County can sort of meaningfully develop and I know some of the conversations they're having are around the idea of establishing some of these sort of clusters.

Q: The big thing now is around life science. Do you see East County ever attracting that kind of project?

A: We actually do have a good chunk of life science and biomedical manufacturing companies out here. The interesting fact is most of the employees live out here. It's



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He is a graduate of San Diego State University with a degree in business management and administration.

Sly also is a graduate of West Hills High School in Santee and Grossmont College.

Prior to becoming CEO, Sly was vice president and chief operating officer of the Economic Development Council.

entirely plausible that we could develop some of these clusters or min-clusters that we see elsewhere throughout the region.

Q: East County has had a reputation for a place with racial issues. Do you think it's warranted?

A: I don't think it's warranted now. I don't think it's been warranted for a long time. That's just my own experience. Everyone has their own experience in how they perceive a community. For me, I found East County to be very welcoming, very neighborly, really again that's the picture of that white picket fence, suburban lifestyle where you know your neighbors, you help each other move, you see each other at the grocery stores. Part of combating that stereotype is one, helping people visit East County to see what this community looks like and two, making sure we focus on those issues meaningfully.

The city of Santee led a branding effort about a year and a half ago and one of the things people mentioned was that perspective of racism or some of the historical ties to that and again, that hasn't been my experience at all living in this community for almost 35 years but I recognize that there are still some challenges to overcome about how we're perceived and how we meaningfully encourage that welcoming activity, encourage that welcoming environment. ■

East County Economic Development Council



FOUNDED: 1984

CEO: James Sly

HEADQUARTERS: El Cajon

BUSINESS: nonprofit to promote research, education and economic development projects

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 6

NOTABLE FACT ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION: In 2020, the council helped more than 700 businesses get \$15.5 million in federal and other government funding to cope with COVID-19 issues.