

EDUCATION

CSUN's economic research center closes



William W. Roberts

By [Gregory J. Wilcox](#), *Los Angeles Daily News*

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A research center formed in the late 1990s to help track the San Fernando Valley's economy has quietly faded away.

The San Fernando Valley Economic Research Center at Cal State Northridge is no longer crunching local numbers.

Founded in 1998, the center had compiled the annual economic forecast for the Valley Industry and Commerce Association and tracked the residential housing market.

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But it was essentially a one person operation.

"I'm retiring and can't find anybody to replace me," said economist William W. Roberts, the center's last director.

He's a former economics professor and chairman of the university's Department of Management.

It's a matter of funding — or lack of it — and changing times that contributed to the center's demise, said Roberts.

Running the center is not a guaranteed path to a permanent professorship at the school, which has a well respected MBA program.

"I can't find anyone in economics who wants to do this because it doesn't lead to tenured promotion. It just doesn't (produce) work published in respected national journals. The younger faculty don't really want to do it because they want to spend time doing something that will get them promoted," explained Roberts.

Kenneth Lord, dean of CSUN's business school, said the staff is working on a plan to create a real estate center to benefit local professionals and students.

"It has to be vetted across the university community. If all goes as hoped, we'll have a rollout in 2017," he said.

Even though the research center had limited manpower, the center's work will be missed, local economic officials said.

"It's hard to figure out where you're going if you don't know where you are," said Kenn Phillips, CEO of the Valley Economic Alliance. "What it did do is provide a good understanding of where we were in business. Without a resource like this, it will be very difficult to figure out where we are going as a community."

[Economic data](#) for the Valley is available because we were granted a "special census tract" designation in 2005. That means government statistics from population growth to jobs and housing prices are available. But it takes a lot of work and money to pull the information together.

VICA President Stuart Waldman said the center's work was important.

"It will be a big loss. I'm surprised that they weren't able to find anybody to fill his spot. The Valley has 1.8 million people. It's as big as Chicago and we need that economic data. It's too important to let it go," Waldman said.

He's going to talk to community leaders and groups to see if there is some way to again get Valley specific information.

"We're going to see what we can figure out. Whether it is Cal Lutheran, Cal State Northridge or Woodbury (University). Maybe someone may be willing to take it on," said Waldman.

The center's beginning was almost as muted at its end.

The first word of it surfaced in the Sept. 10, 1998 issue of the Daily News. There were three photos, including one of Shirley Svorny, the center's first director.

Google the center's name today at it will route you to CSUN's David Nazarian College of Business and Economics.

But a vestige of it still remained, at least last week. The center's phone number, 818-677-7021 still worked and so did its answering machine.

"You have reached the San Fernando Valley Economic Research Center at California State University, Northridge. I'm sorry we missed your call but you may leave your name, a phone number and a brief message and we will respond as soon as possible. Thanks for calling," said the message.