

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Senator Villar Ready for 2010...

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 the recent Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey showing him as the top choice to succeed President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2010.

The SWS survey, according to the Senator, had 7,000 respondents and a 1.2% error margin as compared to the Pulse Asia survey which only has 1,200 respondents.

"Even if I am No. 2 in the other survey, when you average all the surveys, I am still on top," said Villar.

The former House Speaker and former Senate President, who has authored countless bills in both Houses that has benefited small scale enterprises, the environment, health care, responsive social care and high quality education, among many others, said he feels he is the most ready among all the candidates to deal with the problems facing the country today. He will be relying on his experiences and wherewithal to run the government which he says has been mismanaged in the past.

"It's about time that we managed the economy well," he said. "The new President must be able to manage from Day 1. We cannot afford a President who will do on-the-job training. We cannot just focus on one aspect and move on to the next. Everything has to be done simultaneously in order to guarantee improvements in all areas of government."

According to Villar, as President, one must be able to work with the different branches of government and society, including the Senate, the House, the Catholic Church and other institutions and have them work towards the same objective and move in one direction. If one has no experience in making the different institutions work seamlessly, then it will become chaotic, Senator Villar added.

While delegation of duties will be one of the keys to a successful implementation of programs, Villar hinted that concrete results and a full accounting will be demanded.

"It is not enough that you promise me that you will do this or that," he explained. "If say you tell me that your department has presided over the planting of a million trees to help the environment, I will want proof. Where are those trees planted? How many are actually there? It is not enough that you give your word to me."

Senator Villar further stated that efficient tax collection to about 18% of the gross domestic product and introducing the concept of competition may help improve the economy of the Philippines.

Elections in 2010?

As Senator Villar prepares for the upcoming elections next year, he is wary of moves by Congress in promoting the forming of a Constituent Assembly (or Con-Ass) as evidenced most recently by the passage of House Resolution 1109 through Congress.

"I have been warning colleagues that the Charter Change issue is not dead as the administration and its allies would like us to believe," the Senator said. "Kaya nilang gawin 'yan in one day (They can do it in one day). I expected this to happen. I am not happy with it."

Villar says that further movement of the Charter Change (or Cha-Cha), or its approval, will depend on how the people will react to it.

"There are protests now," he said. "But the ad-

ministration and its allies are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. If they feel that the situation will turn bad, then they will not push through with it. But if they can get away with it... On the one hand, *galit ang tao* (the people are angry), but whether that anger translates to widespread protests and a movement by the people, we'll just have to see."

Senator Villar also lamented the fact that the Congress is asking Senators individually to support HR 1109, and not as an institution.

"My worry is when they say that, I have a feeling that they already have some senators with them. Otherwise, they would not be saying that," Villar explained. "When I was Senate President, I had to ask the Senators to act as one, as an institution. I had to rally all the senators when they attempted to do this before. We had to cross party lines then, and we did. That's why we were able to block this. Now, I don't think this Senate will do that."

C-5 Issue

Senator Villar also answered questions on the C-5 issue which has led to a Senate investigation on whether the Senator had benefited illegally or was involved in any impropriety related to the project.

"*Pinapahaba lang nila 'yan para manganak* (They are prolonging the issue and hoping it will bear fruit)," he declared. "Look at the composition of the ethics committee... all of the other presidential candidates are bunched there. The Committee on Finance has already absolved me of any wrongdoing. Even the Department of Public Works and Highways has cleared me of any impropriety."

"This is more of an irritation," he added. "I know that this is being used for political purposes for 2010. Even after one year of accusations, they have not proven anything. They have changed the rules in order to accommodate this case. In the original definition of the ethics committee, what they are accusing me of is not part of the rules. They changed the rules. That's why Senator (Aquilino) Pimentel and Jovy Salonga said, '*Saan ka nakakita na iniba 'yung rules and then they applied it retroactively? (Where else can you see a change of rules and then they applied it retroactively?)*'"

Villar revealed that their decision to not attend the Senate hearings were based on a few developments.

"*Talo ka na nga, kasi ang mga accusers mo* are the judges (You've already lost because your accusers are the judges), but do you know that we learned that even before the first meeting of the Senate ethics committee on Wednesday, a decision was already being passed around on Tuesday? Could you imagine, Wednesday ang meeting but there was already a decision by Tuesday. *Ano ito, eleksyon?* (What are these, the elections?) That's why we did not attend the meeting," Senator Villar explained.

Ready to Face Anything

Senator Villar's readiness for the rigors of the campaign for the 2010 elections can be gleaned from his response to the Senate investigation.

His family, he said, is also ready to deal with what's coming.

"My family is ready," he declared. "*Simple lang ang family ko, walang gulo* (We have a simple life with no drama)."

And himself? "They cannot do anything more to me," said the Senator. "They've already started. I have nothing to hide." ■

Recession' grip eases in April

by MIKE SCHNEIDER AND JEANNINE AVERSA
Associated Press

THE economy's tailspin gave way to a more controlled descent in the spring, according to The Associated Press' monthly analysis of economic stress in more than 3,100 US counties. Still, troubles persist in California related to the housing bust and in the Midwest, pounded by manufacturing layoffs.

The latest results of the AP's Economic Stress Index show the recession that hit with force in the autumn of 2008 and winter of 2009 eased in April as seasonal hiring picked up, helping to offset rising bankruptcies and foreclosures. Still, the analysis found that economic pain remains high compared with year-ago levels.

The AP calculates a score from 1 to 100 based on each county's rate of unemployment, foreclosure and bankruptcy, with lower numbers indicating less economic pain. The average Stress score dipped to 9.7 in April, from 10.3 in March. In April 2008, the national average was 5.9.

April's results "are saying we are very close to the low point in this recession," said Mark Vitner, an economist at Wachovia. "The worst is past, but that doesn't mean the troubles are over."

A county is considered stressed when its score jumps past 11. In February and March, nearly 40 percent of the nation's counties were at or above that threshold. In April, 34 percent scored 11 or higher.

The five highest Stress scores in April were in California's inland valleys, which were the hotbed of the housing bubble and bust. Imperial County, east of San Diego, tops the national list with a score of 30.16, followed by Merced County (26.35), Stanislaus County (23.63), San Joaquin County (22.84) and Yuba County (22.82).

And three out of the five biggest annual increas-

es in stress were northern Indiana counties that have been devastated by manufacturing cutbacks. LaGrange and Elkhart counties both saw 12.8 point increases as unemployment soared by double digits. Neighboring Noble County saw its Stress score jump 11.1 points.

Though the economy shed hundreds of thousands of jobs in April, seasonal hiring in some counties helped lower the average Stress score.

Compared month-to-month, the unemployment rate dipped in more than 80 percent of the nation's 3,141 counties in April from March. But the figures aren't seasonally adjusted, so monthly comparisons are volatile. Hiring, for instance, typically picks up in the spring with longer days and better weather.

Employment improved the most in communities with seasonal tourism. They include Dare County, N.C., home to Nags Head; Cheboygan, Mich., on Lake Huron; and Taney County, Mo., home to the country-music mecca of Branson.

"More and more of the hotels are opening, and other businesses are picking up, so the unemployment decreases," said Jerry Adams, a city official in Branson, where the jobless rate sank from 15.6 percent in March to 10.1 percent in April.

Still, all but 23 counties endured higher unemployment in April 2009 than a year earlier. Job losses in manufacturing, construction, retail and financial activities led the deterioration.

Foreclosure rates inched up in April from the previous year in half the counties nationwide. And from March to April, they rose in 42 percent of the counties, particularly in Florida, California, Nevada and Arizona.

The biggest jumps occurred on the outskirts of cities where affordable new housing had driven up growth in the past decade: Pinal County, Ariz., near

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California: Schwarzenegger contemplating...

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Ending the welfare-to-work program for mothers and their children, which would affect some 546,000 families, and eliminating health insurance for 1 million children from low-income families are among the proposals that have generated the most criticism. The number of Alzheimer's patients, disabled and other frail recipients of in-home care also would be greatly reduced under the governor's latest budget proposal, leaving more than 400,000 people without such support.

This week, Schwarzenegger acknowledged that his decisions will be painful for many.

"I know the consequences of those cuts are not just dollars. I see the faces behind those dollars. ... I see the Alzheimer's patients losing some of their in-home support services," he told lawmakers. "It's an awful feeling, but we have no choice."

California stands apart from other states, at least for now, in considering solving its budget

deficit with such deep cuts to core social services.

The state's projected \$24.3 billion deficit for the fiscal year that begins in July amounts to a quarter of its general fund. Schwarzenegger and Republicans in the Legislature say they will not raise taxes again, after agreeing to \$12.8 billion in sales, personal income and vehicle tax hikes earlier this year.

That has left lawmakers with few alternatives to severe spending cuts because Republicans, while the minority party, hold virtual veto power over the state budget by virtue of California's unusual requirement that fiscal measures be passed by a two-thirds vote of the Legislature.

There is a sense of irony in Schwarzenegger's proposals: Many of the programs to assist the frail and needy have their roots in the Great Depression. It has taken the largest economic downturn since then to undo those programs, at least as proposed in California.

The elimination or significant

reduction in social service programs also cuts against President Barack Obama's economic recovery efforts and attempt to overhaul the nation's health care market.

"The movement is to expand coverage, not contract," said Rachel Klein, deputy director of health policy for Families USA, a consumer advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "If California were to do it, it would certainly be an enormous step behind for the country."

California stands to lose billions in federal matching dollars if Schwarzenegger's proposals pass. Advocates have argued that his cutbacks would jeopardize even more money from the federal stimulus program, but the Obama administration so far has granted waivers on that portion of funding for the state.

White House spokesman Adam Abrams acknowledged California's budget difficulties and said getting through the recession would require tough choices and shared sacrifices. (AP)



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