

High-tech coup for Nevada County

Linear Technology opens a Grass Valley facility.

By Clint Swett -- Bee Staff Writer

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A Silicon Valley chip maker opened a semiconductor design center in Grass Valley on Monday, further bolstering Nevada County's status as a high-tech mecca.

Linear Technology Corp., based in Milpitas, will initially employ four engineers at its new facility. But company president David Bell said he expects that number to double within a year.

Linear, which designs and manufactures integrated circuits for notebook computers, cellular phones and other electronic devices, will use the Grass Valley facility to design chips for its full range of products, Bell said. The company earned \$197.6 million in its last fiscal year on revenue of \$512.2 million.

The Grass Valley facility will be the ninth research center that Linear runs outside of the Bay Area.

The company chose Grass Valley because it boasts a population of engineers that specialize in analog circuitry, which converts digital ones and zeros into information that can be processed by human eyes and ears.

"Talented (analog) designers are a fairly rare breed," Bell said. "If we can find a community where there is a core of talented designers, that's where we'll go."

Set amid pine trees at about 3,000 feet, Nevada City and Grass Valley have attracted about 90 technology companies, ranging from 1-person shops to the 400-employee Thomson Broadcast & Media Solutions, which makes equipment for television studios.

In addition to being the area's largest tech employer, Thomson is also one of the oldest and most influential. It started life as the Grass Valley Group in 1959, manufacturing broadcasting equipment. As its fortunes waxed and waned over the years, it seeded Grass Valley's technology industry with startups as employees left to form their own firms.

While there have been some hard-luck stories, Nevada County's tech industry has survived the technology slump relatively unscathed, said Larry Burkhardt, executive director of the non-profit Nevada County Economic Resources Council.

"Some companies have been doing extremely well; others have curtailed their business," Burkhardt said. "Overall, I'd say things have grown slightly."

For instance, AJA Video, which makes video conversion equipment, has doubled its staff to about 30 people over the past 12 to 16 months, Burkhardt said. But 3Com Corp., the giant maker of networking equipment, shut down its design facility about two years ago.

About the Writer

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High tech heads for the hills

Technology companies operating in Grass Valley and Nevada City, and the number of workers they employ:

* Thomson Broadcast & Media Solutions: 400

* JDK Controls Inc.: 80

* Nvision Inc.: 70

* Tri-Continent Scientific Inc.: 70

* Telestream Inc. 40

* Linear Technology Corp.: 4

Sources: Nevada County Economic Resource Council, company reports



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