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Posted on Wed, May. 22, 2013

Valley leaders brainstorm ways to bring in tourists

By John Holland jholland@modbee.com

last updated: May 22, 2013 10:35:52 PM

TURLOCK --]

Here's a message for tourists passing through Modesto or Merced on their way to Yosemite National Park: Stop and pick some cherries. Or visit a waterfowl refuge. Or walk in the footsteps of George Lucas.

Speakers offered those ideas Wednesday at a conference in Turlock on how to increase tourism in the San Joaquin Valley.

"We're not the Bay Area, and we're not LA, but we've seen growth in our region," said Wes Rhea, executive director of the Stockton Convention and Visitors Bureau.

About 120 people turned out at California State University, Stanislaus, for the event, sponsored by the Great Valley Center and several partners.

The five counties from San Joaquin to Fresno accounted for only 3 percent of the state's \$102 billion in tourist spending in 2011, according to Dean Runyan Associates Inc., a consulting firm.

But possibilities abound, speakers said: Some 10 million people live within 100 miles of the region, and many of them want to see its farms, rivers, reservoirs and other attractions.

Penny Leff, agritourism coordinator at the University of California at Davis, said this kind of enterprise is fairly new but promising. Visitors could spend an hour or two at a corn maze or pumpkin patch, or they could stay overnight at a farm or ranch.

"This is a niche for small farms — the direct relationships with their customers, whether it's farmers markets or having people actually come out to the farm," Leff said.

She urged county planning departments to not impede such efforts with excessive rules or permit fees. She said farmers need to let their insurance companies know that visitors are coming — and not let them drive tractors or climb ladders.

Cindy Lashbrook expects perhaps 1,200 visitors to her farm near Livingston for the ninth annual Pick and Gather at Riverdance Farms on June 1 and 2.

Festival patrons will pick blueberries and cherries, see old-fashioned farm equipment, enjoy music and dancing, and kayak in the adjacent Merced River.

They will have to watch out for hazards such as fire ants and squirrel holes, Lashbrook said, but that's part of life on the farm. "When you see these kids with blueberries and cherries smashed on their faces, they're just having fun," she said.

Enjoy star sighting

Chris Murphy, Sierra Pacific Refrigerated Services CEO and an event promoter in Modesto, said the city's connection to "American Graffiti" often is mentioned by visitors. Lucas based the 1973 movie on his memories of cruising as a teenager on 10th and 11th streets.

Visitors can read all about it on 25 kiosks installed last year along downtown streets. And if they snag a good spot at the Graffiti Summer parade next month, they can see Lucas himself serving as grand marshal.

"George Lucas is coming to cruise for the first time in 51 years on June 7," Murphy said.

Travel in comfort

People who would rather travel by train also can take part in valley tourism, said Dan Leavitt, manager of regional initiatives for the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission.



BEA AHBECK CASSON/bahbeck@mercedsunstar.com
San Joaquin River Stewardship Program crew members and volunteers do a test-run of the kayak river tour on Merced River which will take place during the Riverdance Farms Pick and Gather Festival and Merced River Fair, which will take place June 1-2. - Merced Sun-Star - BEA AHBECK

Amtrak runs six round trips a day — four between Bakersfield and Oakland, and two between Bakersfield and Stockton. The trains have spacious seats, laptop plug-ins, food, drinks and other comforts.

"It's really a great way to see the San Joaquin Valley, to see the corridor," Leavitt said.

He said the line could serve as a feeder into the first leg of the state's high-speed rail system, which could open in 2022 between the Merced area and Southern California. That system, reaching 220 mph in some places, could be a tourist attraction in itself, he said.

See restored refuges

Dave Koehler, coordinator of the San Joaquin River Partnership, said the waterway could become a major attraction thanks to restoration of a long-dry stretch near Firebaugh and other efforts. Boaters, anglers, duck hunters and wildlife watchers could find plenty to enjoy, he said.

Koehler described how the San Joaquin starts high in the southern Sierra Nevada and passes by farms and wildlife refuges west of Merced and Modesto on its way to San Francisco Bay.

"I think we have this incredible resource, from source to sea, in our region," he said.

Visit cheese attraction

Hilmar Cheese Co. draws about 40,000 people a year to its tours and visitor center, said Denise Skidmore, director of education and public relations. They range from schoolchildren in the area to agricultural ministers from other nations who want to see the world's largest cheese plant.

Skidmore said partnerships can enrich the visitors' experience. Around Christmas, for example, they could take a bus tour that also stops for olive oil at Nick Sciabica & Sons in Modesto and for poinsettias at Duarte Nursery near Hughson.

Another key, Skidmore said, is to not leave people disappointed. "If they come once and it's not a great trip and a great experience, they will not come back," she said.

Bee staff writer John Holland can be reached at jholland@modbee.com or (209) 578-2385.

PLACES TO VISIT

Some of the attractions discussed at Wednesday's conference on tourism in the San Joaquin Valley:

- **Graffiti Summer**, with numerous events in June celebrating cruising in Modesto: www.visitmodesto.com or (209) 526-5588
- **Pick and Gather at Riverdance Farms**, June 1-2 near Livingston: www.riverdancefarms.com or (209) 761-0081
- **Hilmar Cheese Co.:** www.hilmarcheese.com or (209) 656-1196
- **San Joaquin River Partnership:** www.sanjoaquinriverpartnership.org or (559) 248-8480
- **Lodi Conference and Visitors Bureau:** www.visitloidi.com or (800) 798-1810
- **Amtrak:** www.amtrak.com or (800) 872-7245

GENERAL INFORMATION

- **Central Valley Tourism Association:** www.visitcentralvalley.com or (800) 514-5539
- **Agricultural tourism:** www.calagtour.org

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Summit seeks to boost economy through local tourism

by Brooke Borba | Patterson Irrigator

May 24, 2013 | 840 views | 0 | 4



Chuck Crawford of Ceres gets ready to throw a fish back into the San Joaquin River at Laird County Park near Grayson while fishing on Tuesday, May 15, 2012.—Irrigator file photo

TURLOCK — Area residents, business leaders and public officials discussed tourism possibilities throughout the San Joaquin Valley on Wednesday, May 22 at a travel and tourism economic summit at California State University, Stanislaus.

The program, themed “Let’s Build Something Together,” offered presentations on how residents can work together to market the San Joaquin Valley to attract more visitors and bring in extra tourism dollars, creating more jobs along the way.

Riverbank-based consultant Virginia Madueño, who recently served as Riverbank’s mayor, hosted the conference, which attracted 125 attendees.

She recalled how delegates from China who visited the northern San Joaquin Valley in June, making stops in Patterson and Newman, appeared more impressed by the tree blossoms, vast fields and lush landscape compared to the tight, cramped cities in Los Angeles.

“Not everyone wants to go to Disneyland or Vegas,” Madueño said. “You’d be surprised how many people are interested in the scenery. When you go to Rome, of course you go to the museums, but you also want to visit the countryside. It’s beautiful!”

Patterson Mayor Luis Molina, saw the San Joaquin River just east of town as a particular regional draw.

“When we talk about destination location, we specifically talk about the San Joaquin River,” Molina said. “If you were to ask general Pattersonites what they would like to see to build our economy, the answer is more employment and attraction opportunities.”

Drawing in visitors to the valley

While the San Joaquin Valley is known more for tractors than tourism, University of California, Davis agritourism coordinator Penny Leff touted the potential for agriculture-related attractions to draw in visitors. Leff has more than 15 years experience working with small and mid-scale farmers, as well as eight years as a program manager for the Berkeley



The line for Boy Scout Troop 81’s apricot ice cream stretches across the Plaza Circle during the 2011 Patterson Apricot Fiesta. The event attracts an estimated 30,000 people annually.—Irrigator file photo



Last year’s Tough Mudder competition in Diablo Grande attracted nearly 20,000 attendees to the West Side.—Irrigator file photo



Ballet Folklorico dancers perform in the annual Fiesta Patrias parade as they make their way around the Plaza Circle on Sept. 15, 2012, the day before Mexican Independence Day. The annual event attracts thousands of residents to Patterson.— Irrigator file photo

Farmers Markets.

“Agritourism is a cross breeding of agriculture and tourism,” Leff explained. “It’s a new enterprise, and it is gaining speed. Small farms are starting to lose grip in the Valley, but a way to peak interest is to have a working farm or ranches for education. It can be farm stands, farm-stays or guest ranches, classes, education and tours.”

Denise Skidmore, Hillmar Cheese Company’s director of education and public relations, believes that even small towns can offer something of value if they believe in their products. The company has grown to be the largest wholesale cheese and whey manufacturer in the world, but also offers tours and

amenities for day travelers.

Tour buses that begin their trail south heading toward Yosemite National Park take a rest stop at the plant, where they are granted a tour and a special meal. These group packages have increased the plant’s economic income and offered school field trips for local students.

“We are always trying to partner with other ag programs,” Skidmore said. “Our business becomes affected when there are not many stops for travelers, so we are always eager to see an increase in businesses or attractions in the valley.”

Cultivating cash

Summit speakers stressed that tourism already is one of the state’s top industries, and increasing the number of visitors to the San Joaquin Valley could serve as a major boost for the region.

The average traveler in California spends \$292 million every day, said Karin Fish, vice president of operations and industry relations for Visit California, the state’s travel and tourism commission. That is the equivalent to \$12.1 million an hour, or \$202,000 every minute, she said.

“As of April 2013, the travel industry is leading the way as the nation’s top economic growth,” Fish said. “Travel and tourism ranks higher than the top four California exports put together.”

Leisure and hospitality rates have skyrocketed in recent years, adding 48,600 visitors between June 2011 and 2012, a 3.2 percent increase. Fish’s report shows that the top demographic of California travelers tend to be residents from China.

“California is one the top contenders for travel because it appeals to outside demographics,” Fish said. “There are five different types of travelers: those looking for family fun, culinary specialties, culture and entertainment, outdoor adventure and recreation and luxury. We have all of that.”

Prospective activities in Patterson

Patterson particularly has lots of tourism potential given its location, Madueño said.

“Patterson is on the brink of something huge,” she said. “They are in close proximity to Interstate 5, Amazon and the San Joaquin River. Patterson has that small-town charm, which is very marketable. If the vision and passion is there, they can create an amazing attraction.”

Molina expects that the annual Apricot Fiesta, scheduled to run Friday, May 31 through June 2, will be one of the grandest efforts for Patterson to attract agritourists in the near future. But he also looks to team up with local youth to discuss other potential recreational activities in the years ahead.

“Our future needs to be at the table for these discussions,” Molina said. “We should start asking them about rafting and kayaking and understanding what is fun for them. Then we can bring experts to the room and talk about networking to see what we can leverage, or what kind of results we want for our community.”

• Contact Brooke Borba at 892-6187, ext. 24 or brooke@pattersonirrigator.com.

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Published on 05/15/2013 - 12:06 pm
Written by Business Journal staff

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CSU Stanislaus will host the first ever San Joaquin Valley Travel and Tourism Economic Summit

Tourism officials and business leaders from all over the Valley will be in Turlock May 22 as CSU Stanislaus hosts the first San Joaquin Valley Travel and Tourism Economic Summit.

The event, taking place from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., will feature presentations and exhibits highlighting the importance of travel and tourism to stimulate economic development throughout the region.

Besides drawing visitors to view San Joaquin Valley's abundant agricultural commodities, Valley leaders will learn how the region can brand and market all kinds of local destinations and offerings.

Layla Forstedt, executive director of the Fresno Convention and Visitors Bureau, will be talking about how the region can collaborate to attract visitors to the San Joaquin Valley while David Koehler of the San Joaquin River Partnership will speak on promoting a national blueway centered on the region's water resources.

Other speakers include Denise Skidmore of Hilmar Cheese, Dan Leavitt of the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission and Glen Roberts with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The summit is being put on by the Great Valley Center based in Modesto. The event is free and open to all although advance registration is required since space is limited.

Those wishing to attend may register online at greatvalley.org/work/sjriver summit or by calling (209) 483-6991.

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Posted on Sun, May. 19, 2013

Turlock meeting eyes how to attract tourists to valley

Bee Staff Reportslocal@modbee.com

last updated: May 19, 2013 10:29:24 PM

TURLOCK --]

A gathering in Turlock on Wednesday will explore how to draw tourists to farms, rivers and other San Joaquin Valley attractions.

Business and community leaders will exchange ideas at the first-ever San Joaquin River Valley Travel and Tourism Economic Summit.

The event, free to the first 150 people who register, will feature speakers from the tourism sector, agriculture, river restoration and other fields.

It is sponsored by the Great Valley Center, based in Modesto, with the help of several partners.

The organizers cited a study estimating that travelers spent about \$2.6 billion in the five counties from San Joaquin to Fresno in 2010. This created about 27,000 jobs and \$167 million in tax revenue.

The spending is small compared with the \$100 billion-plus for all of California each year. The state draws hordes of people to places such as San Francisco, Yosemite National Park, Disneyland and Monterey.

The prospects for the valley include visits to farms and processing plants, recreation on rivers and reservoirs, special events such as rodeos and car shows, and attractions aimed at Amtrak riders.

The speakers will include:

- Denise Skidmore, marketing director at Hilmar Cheese Co.
- Penny Leff, agritourism coordinator at the University of California at Davis
- Nancy Beckman, executive director of the Lodi Conference and Visitors Bureau
- Cindy Lashbrook, owner of Riverdance Farms along the Merced River.
- Wes Rhea, executive director of the Stockton Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Dan Leavitt, special projects coordinator for the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
- Dave Koehler, coordinator of the San Joaquin River Partnership
- Chris Murphy, a Modesto businessman and event promoter
- Layla Forstedt, executive director of the Fresno Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Glen Roberts of the U.S. Department of Commerce
- Karin Fish, vice president for industry relations and operations at Visit California
- Dave Hosley, executive director of the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at UC Merced
- Richard Jantz, retired deputy chief executive officer for Stanislaus County

TOURISM SUMMIT

- **When:** 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesday
- **Where:** California State University, Stanislaus, Event Center; parking is in Lot 8 in the southeast part of the Turlock campus
- **Cost:** Free to the first 150 people who register, \$25 for others. Lunch is included. Advance registration is required.

• **More information:** www.greatvalley.org/work/sriversummit or (209) 483-6991

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