

Modesto Bee

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Valley tourism leaders share ideas at Modesto summit

By John Holland

jholland@modbee.com October 27, 2014

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Promoters of tourism in the San Joaquin Valley might learn something from apple growers up in El Dorado County.

Fifty years ago, they realized that they could not compete with Washington state in the mass market. They looked instead to tourism, figuring that visitors would love to pick their own fruit, smell the fresh-baked pies and otherwise take in the apple experience.

"They evolved from selling apples to selling the place where apples are grown," said Bill Center, a campground owner and former county supervisor in El Dorado, at a tourism summit Monday in Modesto.

The second annual event brought forth ideas on how to boost visitor spending in the five-county region from San Joaquin County south to Fresno County. The region got only \$2.9 billion of the \$109.6 billion that tourists dropped in California last year, according to a report by the Dean Runyan Associates consulting firm.

About 100 people took part in the event at the Gallo Center for the Arts, sponsored by a partnership that created the San Joaquin River Valley tourism campaign.

Agritourism got much of the attention, as the Valley already has plenty of farm and ranches. Speakers also touted the potential for passenger rail, especially with the planned expansion to Modesto and Merced of Altamont Commuter Express trains from the Bay Area. And there's more – the Oakdale Cowboy Museum, the new planetarium at Modesto Junior College, the cruising tributes inspired by native son George Lucas, among other ideas.

Ott Farms, which grows pick-your-own blueberries and cherries southwest of Modesto, got a plug from David White, chief executive officer at the Stanislaus Business Alliance. He recalled cars in the parking lot with license plates from Livermore, Walnut Creek and San Jose.

"The people who were there were not from here," he said. "They were from other parts of California, specifically the Bay Area."

The growers in El Dorado created Apple Hill, which features more than 50 farms producing apples and other fruit. The county east of Sacramento also touts its wineries, whitewater rafting, Gold Rush towns and other attractions.

River refuges

Center said the Valley could increase tourism on its own rivers, including the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and Merced.

"You have some of the best wildland refuges that exist anywhere in the world," he said, referring to the expanses of protected land where the Merced, Tuolumne and Stanislaus rivers flow into the San Joaquin.

He added that the John Muir Trail, named for the famed preservationist, runs for about 200 miles near the crest of the Sierra Nevada. "But John Muir came all the way down the Merced River in a canoe," he said. "How about communicating that?"

White said the Valley could profit from “staycations” – getting its own residents to spend leisure dollars here rather than in places such as Monterey.

Riding the rails

ACE runs four trains from Stockton to San Jose each weekday morning and four return trips in the late afternoon and evening. It aims to have an extension to Modesto by 2018 and to Merced by 2022, along with midday trains more suited to leisure travelers.

“ACE will become much more a part of trying to bring people to the San Joaquin Valley,” said Dan Leavitt, manager of regional initiatives for the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission, which oversees the service.

Mass transit advocates noted that while most Americans do not travel this way, it is part of daily life for people visiting from Europe and Japan.

“For them, it is not a bad thing to jump on a bus or a train for two or three hours and go somewhere,” said Ben Duran, president and chief executive officer of the Great Valley Center in Modesto.

A bus system already takes visitors from Merced to Yosemite National Park and a few points in between. The stops include an Amtrak station, part of a line that has four round trips a day between Bakersfield and Oakland and two between Bakersfield and Sacramento.

Performing arts

Cecil Russell, CEO of the Modesto Chamber of Commerce, said the Gallo Center is an example of a successful attraction. He noted that many of its performers are on tours that include San Francisco and if residents there can't get tickets, they can try Modesto.

Virginia Camacho, CEO of the Manteca Convention and Visitors Bureau, suggested that Valley residents get far-flung relatives to hold family reunions here.

“Let them do the traveling,” she said. “You don't have to house them. Put them in a hotel.”

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

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