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CALAVERAS BUSINESSES PONDER DISTRICT TO PAY FOR MARKETING

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

July 02, 2012

Record Staff Writer

SAN ANDREAS - Leaders in Calaveras County's tourism industry are considering taxing themselves to pay for expanded marketing of the area's forests, lakes, wineries and resorts.

Calaveras Visitors Bureau board President Steve Markle said talks are in the early stages to see if owners of hotels and tourist attractions are willing to form what is known as a tourism-marketing district.

Such districts are sometimes called tourism business improvement districts. They offer a way for tourism businesses - most often hotels and motels - in a city, county or region to pay for promotional campaigns to attract visitors.

Markle said most California tourist destinations - from San Francisco to Anaheim - already have such districts. San Francisco's district raises about \$27 million a year. Anaheim's brings in about \$9 million, according to Civitas, a consulting firm that helps establish such taxing agents.

"Calaveras County is competing for visitors with every single destination in California, from Disney to Napa Valley," said Jeff Stai, owner of Twisted Oak Winery and a Calaveras Visitors Bureau board member.

In the immediate region, the Lodi Tourism Business Improvement District brings in about \$156,000 a year to promote community as a destination. A similar district in Stockton brings in about \$850,000 a year to support the Stockton Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Calaveras Visitors Bureau, in contrast, has had to depend on a marketing budget of about \$300,000 a year, supplied primarily through a transient occupancy tax, more commonly called a hotel tax.

"A tourism marketing district would put us on a more level playing field and hopefully get our budget up to a \$500,000 operating budget," Markle said.

Tourism industry leaders and county officials have tried repeatedly to increase the county's hotel tax, which is one of the lowest in California at 6 percent. Voters, however, have defeated those efforts, most recently in 2004.

Forming a tourism marketing district does not require a general vote. Instead, a majority of the businesses involved have to petition local government - in this case Calaveras County - to create the district.

The exact details of the tax have yet to be worked out. It could be a percentage of a hotel bill or a flat fee per person per night. Destinations such as golf courses and ski resorts might have their own formulas for contributing.

"It may be one rate for tasting rooms and another rate for lodging, and another rate for attractions like golfing, skiing or rafting," Markle said.

Markle said Outdoor Adventure Recreation Specialists, the company he works for, is in favor of such a district and willing to pay the tax.

At least some other tourism business owners are also on board.

"It is a way of getting done what the (hotel tax) was supposed to do, but without so many problems," said Steve Fairchild of Moaning Caverns in Vallecito. "I am a total anti-tax guy. But I think in the case where an industry taxes itself and gets the benefit from it, that's not so bad."

Proponents of such a tourism-marketing district say another advantage is that the revenue would be guaranteed to go to tourism promotion. Under law, elected leaders of Calaveras County or Angels Camp, which collects a 10 percent hotel tax, could decide to keep the money for other uses and not fund the Calaveras Visitors Bureau.

Officials said the additional funding could be used to create new large events similar to the Murphys Grape Stomp, to install tourist information kiosks in key locations, to launch an online marketing campaign and to improve the quality of videos and photos used in marketing efforts.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

The call of the Lode

Top reasons visitors come to Calaveras County:

- Calaveras Big Trees: The giant sequoia groves have been attracting tourists since the 1850s. About 150,000 visitors a year come to the state park.

- **Bear Valley:** Although the ski resort is in Alpine County, many people who visit stay in hotels and vacation rentals in Calaveras County. The mountain draws 75,000 to 140,000 visitors a year.
- **Wineries and restaurants:** Murphys has become a hub for foodies and wine connoisseurs. Kautz Ironstone also is a major concert venue.
- **Caves:** California Caverns in Mountain Ranch and Moaning Cavern in Vallecito are among the largest and most popular commercial caves in California.
- **Lakes:** Anglers and boaters flock to Lake Tulloch, New Melones, New Hogan, Camanche and Pardee. Campgrounds fill during holiday weekends.
- **Forests:** Calaveras County is the gateway to two wilderness areas — the Carson Iceberg and the Mokelumne — as well as a number of developed camping areas in the Stanislaus National Forest. Visitors enjoy hiking, biking, boating, fishing, driving off-road vehicles, backpacking and car camping.
- **Golf courses:** Greenhorn Creek in Angels Camp is a major source of tourism revenue. The county also has courses in Copperopolis, Valley Springs and Arnold.
- **History:** Foothill downtowns and museums as well as the historic theme of the Calaveras County Fair and Jumping Frog Jubilee attract fans of the Old West.

Sources: Calaveras County Visitors Bureau;

California State Parks; Bear Valley Mountain

http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120702/A_NEWS/207020307