

## REPORT TO CITY COUNCIL

**DATE:** JULY 13, 2011

**TO:** HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** GREG RAMIREZ, CITY MANAGER

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**SUBJECT:** SEEKING DIRECTION ON A TRI-CITY (CONEJO VALLEY) TOURISM INITIATIVE

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Staff is seeking feedback and direction on a proposed Tri-City (Conejo Valley) Tourism initiative which, as proposed, would involve the cities of Agoura Hills, Thousand Oaks, and Westlake Village. In addition, the Greater Conejo Valley Chamber of Commerce has participated, and is a key stakeholder and partner, in the proposed tourism effort. Although there are several other key partnerships that would need to be developed, such as National Parks, State Parks, local hotels, various businesses, and regional recreation and cultural organizations, staff is seeking direction from the City Council as to whether or not there is support to develop the tourism efforts further before fully developing these partnerships.

The City was fortunate to have a Recreation/Tourism graduate student work as an intern to complete an initial study and analysis regarding the feasibility of a tourism plan for the City of Agoura Hills. The study looked at the potential to initiate and sustain a tourism effort locally and ultimately showed that the City does have unique assets that would make it an attractive place to visit for certain travelers, but that there are also areas to consider and address, such as minimal clustering of retail near hotels, where travelers would stay, etc. Thus, it was decided to consider a regional approach to take advantage of the other assets in the Conejo Valley, rather than as an individual entity. This was also done in conjunction with the Amgen Tour of California bicycle race that traveled through the area, in an attempt to quantify the value created from tourist efforts.

Eventually, staff and representatives from the Land Use/Economic Development Committee met with the counterparts in the cities of Thousand Oaks and Westlake Village and the Greater Conejo Valley Chamber of Commerce to discuss a regional approach to tourism as each jurisdiction had some initial interest in looking at a possible tourism effort. A tri-city tourism study was completed by a consultant, Sustainable Tourism Management, which focused on the assets of the region as a whole by looking at the cities individually, as well as the opportunities for tourist attraction, existing and planned infrastructure, community demographics, and the layout and proximity of regional attractions. The study also included a sampling of various stakeholders through focus groups and measuring their opinions and attitudes towards tourism development.

The results of the study showed that the Conejo Valley has a strong potential to attract tourists, but that the focus would need to be on the correct type of tourist that would be most likely to

visit the area. Each city involved in the study was shown to have strong and unique assets that held potential to attract tourists, but as individual entities may not be able to continue a successful program without utilizing a regional approach in which the needs of travelers could be met throughout the Conejo Valley. Although each city has a slightly different make-up in the terms of demographics, travelers to any area look beyond that and look for whether or not the place they visit has a variety of hotels, unique restaurants, opportunities for activities, and nearby shopping. The tourists that were most likely to be sought would be those that enjoy outdoor recreational activities and that a collaborative approach could also be done to attract smaller conferences, weekend festivals, and sporting events (focusing on youth and young adult sports tournaments, etc). The Conejo Valley was shown to be a potential hub for day visitors who may want to visit the beaches, go outlet shopping in Camarillo, visit Hollywood and other areas in Los Angeles.

The stakeholder feedback indicated that most people are not opposed to having visitors come in to the area because it does offer some economic benefits, but that they did not want to see the area turn into an Anaheim or Orlando, Florida type of area and that traffic impact would be a concern. Although it is not being proposed that the Conejo Valley become a theme park type tourist area, these concerns show the importance of having a detailed and well-thought-out tourism plan and an established identity that makes concerted efforts to educate and communicate with the public. These efforts are vital to the success of any tourism plan.

Since the completion of the tri-city study, the various city staff, elected representatives, and other stakeholders have met to discuss the next steps in the tourism effort and have come to an agreement that the next step in the process would be to complete a strategic plan that would include: establishing some type of an oversight board consisting of the key stakeholders (separate from the cities and Chamber Board), creating a clear implementation strategy, establishing how to reach out to and include other stakeholders, determining a long-term funding source, and a marketing plan. It was also proposed that the Greater Conejo Valley Chamber of Commerce assist in staffing and managing the initial efforts of the tourism program separate from the Chamber's day-to-day operations and member elected board, thus keeping tourism efforts non-member based. This will be discussed in more detail should each of the involved agencies choose to move forward with this initiative. Staff has met with several consultant groups that specialize in travel and tourism related plans. It is estimated that the next phase would cost a total of \$15,000, which is being proposed to be split by the three cities evenly. It is estimated it will take approximately 6 months to complete the tasks and additional time to implement a long-term funding mechanism. Although staff has looked at multiple funding sources, it is imperative to first establish full support from each of the agencies involved and then develop a strategic plan that outlines the steps to reach the established goals. Should the agencies all agree to support moving forward with the next phase of this initiative, then staff would bring back further information to the City Council to review and provide direction, including various funding options.

Staff is now requesting feedback and direction as to whether or not there is support to continue with the next phase in establishing a tourism plan for the Conejo Valley. Should the City Council support these further efforts then staff will allocate the time and resources necessary to complete the next phase and bring back the completed strategic plan and further information at a later date.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff is recommending that City Council provide feedback and direction on whether or not to continue with the next phase of a Tri-City (Conejo Valley) Tourism effort.