

Expert says area needs convention center

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SANTA CRUZ — The man largely responsible for bringing the Moscone Convention Center to San Francisco says Santa Cruz County needs a medium-sized convention facility.

The county's tourism industry could use a medium-sized facility with hotel and meeting rooms that could be used as the headquarters during a convention, according to Robert J. Sullivan, former general manager and executive director of the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Such a facility, Johnson said, could be used as a gathering point during a convention. While this would be the main facility, conventioners would also use existing hotels and motels in the area.

Sullivan made this suggestion Thursday at the annual installation luncheon of the Santa Cruz County Convention and Visitors Bureau at the Coconut Grove's Sun Room.

After the luncheon, Sullivan told The Sentinel he didn't have any specific development proposal in mind when he suggested a medium-sized convention facility with 450-500 hotel rooms.

A proposal now is in the works to build a large convention and performing arts center on the Porter-Sesnon site across from Cabrillo

College in Aptos. This proposal includes about 500 housing units for conventioners.

But Sullivan — who now owns his own government relations and travel marketing firm in San Francisco — told The Sentinel he wasn't aware of this proposal.

"Santa Cruz doesn't need a Moscone-type facility," he said. "It needs a gathering point with rooms, restaurants, bars and meeting rooms that could be used as a focus point for a convention that's also using existing facilities.

"It should put them (the existing facilities) into the convention business."

While the topic of the luncheon was "Tourism is Big Business," it wasn't a day for tourism. As Sullivan spoke, rain poured over the glass roof of the Sun Room.

Joe Flood, head of the local Convention and Visitors Bureau introduced Sullivan as the man who "suffered two heart attacks to get a convention center built in San Francisco."

Actually, Sullivan said, he only had one heart attack. That was in 1974 when the Moscone Center project was turned down by the Supreme Court, he said. Eventually those wanting the center won out, with the unusual underground facility opening last year.

Santa Cruz also has had its share of controversy over convention centers. A proposal to build one at Lighthouse Field was turned down by voters in the city of Santa Cruz and controversy is brewing over the proposed

Wingspread development on the Porter-Sesnon site.

Sullivan told the luncheon crowd that while there are great opportunities for the tourism industry on the horizon, tourism here is lacking several essential items.

One of these is the medium-size convention facility. The other is a program to encourage foreign tourists to come here, he said.

As for the convention facility, Sullivan said. "The fastest way for that to happen is for you to act like you want it to happen."

What's needed to bring a convention center to this area is a government commitment to tourism, citizens admitting that tourism is good for them and a strong leadership within the tourism industry, according to Sullivan.

Local government, he said, must reinvest tourist tax dollars into the tourism industry or else tourists are going to go elsewhere.

Citizens, Sullivan said, must believe tourism is something good for their lifestyles in order to make the industry a continuing success here.

They should ask themselves how many of the 400 restaurants in the county would exist if it weren't for tourism, he said.

"Long after the dollars are spent and the convention is over, there is a residual benefit. . . . It is the benefit of the increase in lifestyle for every person in the county because that convention was here."

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