



Tourist industry struggles to regain footing

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Santa Cruz County business has embarked on the road to recovery from the Oct. 17 earthquake, but it's only a beginning.

The number of visitors to the area is still low and, because tourism and agriculture are the "two major forces" in the county, the decline in visitors is affecting a lot of people, said Rita Quinn, executive director of the Santa

Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council.

Reports from the lodging industry, which pays Transient Occupancy Tax to the cities and the county and can be a barometer of how much business is coming into the county, are that occupancy is greater in some hotels, motels and bed-and-breakfasts, Quinn said. However, others are doing a less-than-normal business and some are empty. Even those that are doing

well report their clientele has changed to include fewer visitors.

In previous years, customers were nearly all visitors to the county, Quinn said. Nowadays, they're earthquake crews and displaced families as well as visitors, she said.

Because visitors who stay in hotels tend to dine out, restaurants have sharply felt the decline, she said, particularly "fine dining" restaurants. Some of the more casual restaurants are also

in trouble, she said.

"Many of them are doing fine," Quinn said, "but others may have to close their doors."

Larry Marquez, president of the Santa Cruz County Restaurant Association, said between 30 and 50 restaurants were knocked out of business by the quake and many of those are now getting back on their feet, but in reduced circumstances. Restaurants that reopened in the pavilions in downtown Santa Cruz, for exam-

ple, just don't have the storage space they once had, he said.

The earthquake gave the area an image problem, Quinn said, because the media concentrated on the destruction, so the CVC is working to overcome that by getting the word out to surrounding areas that Santa Cruz is still a nice place to visit. A breakfast meeting was held yesterday in Santa Cruz to discuss the state of tourism and the CVC's work.

The CVC was putting together

a promotional film on the county when the quake struck, Quinn said. Some of that footage was used for a 30-second television spot that aired daily from Nov. 20 to Dec. 3 on KNTC Channel 11 and KCIU Channel 36 to promote the area to other communities, she said. The TV stations also donated air time, so the CVC got more than it had counted on for its money and is working on air-

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ing the spot again early next year.

The CVC is also making the most of free publicity, Quinn said. It publicized the reopening of downtown Santa Cruz and was able to gain national coverage, she said, and would like to do the same for Watsonville. The organization is also working closely with the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau to promote the area, she added.

The CVC's work appears to be having an effect, Quinn said. Capitola Village, the Capitola Mall and the Santa Cruz Downtown Association have all reported a good retail trade this holiday shopping season, she said.

Next the CVC will focus on drumming up business for the first two quarters of next year, she said, "because those are notoriously slow seasons anyway."

Residents can help by encouraging out-of-town friends and relatives to visit, she said, and a months-long survey on the types of people who visit Santa Cruz County should give the CVC a better idea of how to promote the area. The survey was started last spring and is expected to be completed Dec. 31.

Some people might be surprised at the survey's findings, she said. Most people who visit the county, for example, are well-educated and well-heeled, earning between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year, Quinn said. And many of them do go to Watsonville.

Researchers spent more than three hours one day at a "you pick" farm in the Watsonville area, she said, and never met one person from Santa Cruz County.

"Many visitors are attracted to Watsonville," Quinn said, "even though Watsonville may not be aware of it."