



New Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce President Theo Wierdsma sees a bright future for tourism in Watsonville. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Watsonville wants them, but

# WILL THEY COME?

Pajaro Valley  
seeks a greater  
share of the area's  
tourism dollar

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## WATSONVILLE

✓ FROM THE ROOFTOPS of Watsonville's highest buildings on Main Street, you can see a ribbon of cars speeding tourists along the highway between Monterey and San Francisco.

A few stop for gas, winding a circuitous route through the community to an expanse of farm land and low foothills. Some tourists stop at roadside fruit stands, dropping a few dollars on their way to other places. They rarely stay.

There are no Mystery Spots or Boardwalks, no

elephant seal migrations or convention centers. Pocketed between tourist havens that draw millions, Watsonville bears a reputation for gangs and unemployment. It is not exactly a tourist magnet.

An estimated three million people visit Santa Cruz County each year, but they linger in the north. Monterey County claims seven million annual guests. In the middle of it all, Watsonville remains a largely poor agricultural community where high unemployment burdens the economy even in today's boom times. It is not an easy tourist sell.

"That's one of the ongoing questions we've been trying to resolve: How do we capture the thousands of cars that pass by on Highway 1?" asks Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios. "... We're

still searching for that niche that can bring them."

The tourist dollar is elusive. Only a few businesses independently market their wares. Yet the local Gizdich Ranch and Pajaro Dunes draw thousands.

The city, with just a handful of lodging establishments, collected just \$281,433 in transient occupancy (hotel and motel) tax in fiscal year 1997-98. Santa Cruz collected \$2,716,397. There was more than \$3 million collected in the unincorporated areas of the county. Only Scotts Valley drew less with \$101,108. Little Capitola brought in \$286,436.

"We're barely surviving here," Rios says. "The

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# Tourism

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per capita income in the community is the lowest in the county."

One way to fix that is collecting a few dollars from tourists.

"We have something to offer these folks," says Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce President Theo Wierdsma. Wierdsma, manager of the Gottschalks department store on Main Street, is trying to spearhead a tourism turnaround.

"We can create the music," he says. "We can create the ambiance. We can give them something to take with them."

When he took over the helm at the chamber, Wierdsma launched a tourism task force. He solicited suggestions for a community slogan and received entries like: "Watsonville: a town to come home to," "Watsonville: a little bit country and a whole lot more," and "Watsonville, in Monterey Bay's valley of opportunity."

Wierdsma is not talking about redirecting vast city resources. It is an effort born in the private sector. It is not, he says, much of an investment to mail letters to travel companies inviting them to tour the city plaza and a strawberry farm and stay for dinner downtown.

"We just have to figure out how to package it," he said.

With the opening of the 95-room Red Roof Inn in February, there are more economy rate rooms available. Franchise co-owner Chuck Allen says he has had full houses more than once already. A one-night sampling of the guests surprised him: About 34 percent were from the Monterey Bay region. The next largest group was from the San Joaquin Valley. Only about a quarter of the guests were from the San Francisco Bay Area.

"Tourism is the biggest sleeper that anyone could imagine," Allen said. "The same reason that you and I live here is the reason we need to do more to tell the tourism story of the Monterey Bay."

Allen has room for 12 tour buses to park out front. "I'm not just hoping — I have a meeting next week with a man who works with tour bus companies. He's been presenting our package at various conferences."

Allen wants Watsonville to be one of the layover stops in the typical triangle tour of San Francisco,

**'We have something to offer. ... We just have to figure out how to package it.'**

**— Theo Wierdsma,  
Pajaro Valley  
chamber president**

Yosemite and Monterey.

"We're trying to sell staying in the Red Roof Inn in Watsonville on the way and maybe take a day at Elkhorn Slough or see strawberries being harvested or go to Roaring Camp. ... I don't think it's a hard-sell at all."

But Allen spent 15 years trying to get his hotel built. It wasn't easy finding a lender willing to risk a South County investment.

That the hotel was ever built shows some healthy occupancy levels in the area, said Maggie Ivy, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Conference & Visitors Council.

"South County overall is looking like a good place for investment," she said.

Private business insists a little marketing will go a long way. But, it has a long way to go.

"It's very difficult to figure out how to get to Watsonville," Wierdsma said. There is no sign on Highway 1 directing people to Main Street and the business district.

"If you come from Monterey, you have no clue."

Signage and dissemination of basic marketing brochures are some of the task force's most elementary goals. There's also talk of a 24-hour tourist information center in the lobby of the Red Roof Inn, which is visible from the highway.

Wierdsma wants tour buses parked around the downtown plaza by summer.

"I envision around the square down there that we could be the greatest little Hispanic town north of the border, but that's going to take some doing," said E.H. "Mickey" Holzman, owner of Pajaro Dunes on Monterey Bay and a member of Chamber tourism task force. "The community has to want this image."

Shifting economic priorities is no easy task. Some people say tourism

provides too many low-paying jobs.

The Gizdich Ranch draws about 10,000 visitors annually. They are usually tourists on day or weekend trips, driving an average of 60-80 miles to pick their own berries or buy pies or fresh apples.

Nita Gizdich, semi-retired ranch owner, invests heavily in marketing.

"For the culture we have in our Watsonville area I can't believe they haven't done anything yet," Gizdich said.

City officials say it's more a shortage of resources than imagination.

"For us to put a lot of resources in an industry that we're not really sure can capture what we want to may not be a wise thing to do," Rios notes. "Where do we spend our few resources that we have?"

Rios calls upon the private sector to bring proposals to the council.

City Manager Carlos Palacios says tourism is part of the city's economic strategy — but it's not a major part.

"I think the council does agree that marketing the city and promoting our image are very important things," Palacios says. "If anything it's just the lack of resources that we have."

Part of Nancy Wright's duties as project manager for the Watsonville redevelopment agency, is to link the area's fractious attractions — the open-air markets, the festivals, the upscale manufacturers' outlets, the afternoon concerts in the plaza. She needs to polish the package until it shines.

Wright is responsible for pulling together the Watsonville manufacturers' outlet sale this weekend.

She is working on a city image enhancement task force.

The reality, Wright says, is that Watsonville is the epitome of middle-class values.

"The guys in sombreros dozing in



Though Watsonville has no Mystery Spot or Boardwalk, it has events such as Cinco de Mayo and the Strawberry Festival that draw thousands to the city. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

the sun in the plaza, that's the easy story," Wright says. "The harder one is the quality of life and the dedication to values and the hard work, the American way that is part of the culture here whether it's Anglo or Latino and people don't grasp that."

The 35th annual Watsonville Fly-In and Air Show is expected to draw more than 10,000 people and generate about \$500,000 on Memorial Day weekend. The Watsonville Strawberry Festival draws at least the same

number.

"There are no rooms available," Wright says.

The revitalization process may be slow, but it's happening, Wierdsma says.

"Some people are still thinking that if you come to Watsonville, people are walking around with AK-47s. This is a beautiful community."

The revitalization process is in its infancy. "The infrastructure hasn't been built. It almost has to be done

top down. You have to bring people before businesses are willing to come here."

A few years ago, letters about the strawberry festival went out to tour operators and seven buses arrived in Watsonville, recalls Wierdsma.

"I greeted those buses myself and walked them through the store. I made 30 percent more business that day. Last year these buses didn't come and that 30 percent disappeared."