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## GREENLIGHT



# We built it, and they are coming

BY **JEFF VONKAENEL** / [jeffv@newsreview.com](mailto:jeffv@newsreview.com)

**I want visitors to come to Sacramento.** I particularly like visitors who attend our museums, festivals, concerts and sporting events because their dollars support institutions that make the town more fun for those of us who live here.

That is why I support Visit Sacramento and its efforts to bring tourists and conventions to our community. I attended its annual State of Hospitality Industry Event, held last week at Memorial Auditorium. Over a very good lunch, we heard Visit Sacramento CEO Mike Testa and his team explain their efforts to sell Sacramento to the rest of the world.

How does our city compare to other cities? As wonderful as our two rivers are, they are not the Pacific Ocean with its beauty and ability to make better weather. So we have to work harder.

Sacramento's farm-to-fork movement has received national buzz because of our many farmers markets and year-round growing season, but most importantly for tourists because of our wonderful restaurants. Testa was delighted about the recognition we'd received from the premier worldwide restaurant guide, Michelin. Recognizing numerous Sacramento restaurants, Michelin had special praise for Mother, Canon and Frank Fat's.

But we've got more than just great food: Golden 1 Center and the revitalized downtown, an upgraded convention center and more hotel rooms to host bigger conventions, the proposed soccer stadium and nearby practice fields to attract more sporting events and a science center coming soon. Each addition to this list makes Sacramento a better place to visit.

We built it, and they will come. According to the Visit Sacramento annual report, visitors added \$177.6 million to the local economy last year. Sacramento's 408 conventions attracted 414,828 delegates spending

183,743 nights in our hotels. That's a lot of people dropping dollars in our restaurants, stores and hotels. It's a lot of jobs. It also makes Sacramento a better place for us to live.

Some will say we should not spend our precious government resources on tourism-related projects when we have such pressing housing and social service needs. This is an excellent point. But it may not be an either-or question. It is hoped that investments to make our community more attractive to visitors will bring in additional dollars so that we end up with both a more attractive city and more money to support housing. We can have our cake and eat it too.

But not all investments made to attract tourists pencil out.

Stockton's experience with its money-losing sports and arts arena is one example of an ill-advised project. In my experience, some of the best investments are low-cost grants to local arts and entertainment groups. For example, SN&R started the Friday Night Summer Concert Series in the Park with a \$10,000 grant from the city. I am thrilled that the city of Sacramento has increased its arts budget and made a commitment to support culturally diverse artists, small creative businesses, youth-focused organizations and more arts in neighborhood and community settings.

I imagine that at a future State of Hospitality Industry Event, Testa will be telling us how Sacramento attracts so many national and international visitors because of our wonderful arts and entertainment scene that celebrates so many different art forms, from traditional to cutting edge. □

**Jeff vonKaenel** is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.