

El Dorado Hills gains California Welcome Center

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El Dorado Hills has the newest California Welcome Center for tourism thanks to sign envy.

The El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce had seen signs saying "Tourist Information" along Highway 50 at Folsom to the west and Cameron Park to the east.

"That's what I wanted," said chamber President Debbie Manning, "to pull people off 50 into the community."

Too bad. When she contacted Assemblywoman Alyson Huber's office to see about getting signs for El Dorado Hills, she was told regulations prohibited another tourist information center and sign so close to the ones in Folsom and Cameron Park.

But Huber's office called back to see if Manning wanted to open a California Welcome Center.

"I said, 'What's a California Welcome Center?' " Manning said.

For starters, it comes with flashier freeway signs than the ones at Folsom and Cameron Park.

Manning was sold.

It wasn't quite that simple, though.

The Chamber of Commerce had to write up a proposal and vie for the center.

It probably didn't hurt that the tourism consultant who developed the state's Welcome Center concept lives in El Dorado Hills.

The chamber opened its 2,000-square-foot center – one of 17 in the state – in the El Dorado Hills Town Center on Friday. Travelers were already showing up Wednesday, after the state Department of Transportation erected the new signs.

Manning's research leads her to believe the signs will draw 15,000 people off the highway each year, with about 20 percent of them locals.

In addition to informing out-of-towners, "hopefully it encourages residents to take 'staycations' and explore their own back yard," Huber said in a prepared statement.

Visitors will find a whole wall of tourism brochures and magazines – similar to those at other Welcome Centers, but with a focus on El Dorado, Amador and Calaveras attractions.

They'll see a 20-foot mural and kiosks that feature the region's outdoor activities – rafting, biking, hiking, farm visits, off-roading – 12 displays in all.

Each kiosk has a little 3-D illustration – real hiking poles, skis and an Amgen bike race jersey, for example.

Manning wants to add hands-on activities for adults and kids.

One concept was some sort of activity using a zipline, a cable with a pulley that people can ride on. Some Tahoe resorts have zipline rides.

"We're trying to make ourselves more of an attraction than just a Welcome Center," Manning said.

Staff will not only dispense information, but function somewhat like concierges, helping visitors plan trips and directing them to hotels should the displays sway them enough to stay overnight.

Even if they don't, they may be there long enough to follow the odors wafting from the waffle cone maker at the ice cream shop next door.

Some things may work even better than a sign.

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