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Opinion

Trail Town program promotes hiking, could benefit economy

By Priscila Franco, guest opinion

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Mt. Shasta and nearby communities like Dunsmuir, McCloud, and Weed are my kind of towns – trail towns. They're chock-full of people adventurous with spirits and welcoming hearts, surrounded by an abundance of trails and outdoor recreation opportunities. And now it will be official – Mt. Shasta will be the first "Pacific Crest Trail Town." The Trail Town program is being piloted by the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA).

I'm proud to say I'm a member of the Board of Directors for this awesome, non-profit organization which is based in Sacramento. The PCTA works in partnership with the USDA Forest Service, tasked with managing and maintaining the Pacific Crest Trail.

"Our goal with the trail towns program is not only to promote communities as rest and resupply stops for long-distance hikers," said PCTA communications director Scott Wilkinson, "but also to benefit local economies by helping towns near the PCT promote themselves as destinations for hiking and other outdoor recreation."

The people around here love their trails. At a recent Forest Service-hosted meeting in Mt. Shasta to gather public input for a proposal to build 45 miles of new trails, over 150 people made their excitement known by showing up. The proposal was made possible by the Mt. Shasta Trail Association working closely with the Forest Service securing a \$420,000 grant from the McConnell Foundation to move the proposal forward.

"There was a notable spirit in the room," said Barry Price, Mt. Shasta Trail Association president. The crowd at the City Park's Upper Lodge was an interesting mix of the outdoor enthusiasts that call southern Siskiyou County

home, including mountain bikers, hikers, equestrians, cross-country skiers, and long-distance runners.”

Local Forest Service Recreation Officer for the Shasta-McCloud Management Unit (SMMU), Becky Cooper says that, “On any given weekend throughout the year, 7 to 10 of our major trailheads are full to capacity.” This is a notable increase in popularity since I first came to the SMMU as the Deputy District Ranger in 2003 and even when I was the District Ranger from 2008 to 2011.

The warm weather this winter saw the Gateway Trailhead on Everitt Memorial Highway full to the brim, day after day. And that is just the trails on our local national forest. Other popular trails are the Lake Siskiyou Trail, Spring Hill Trail, Box Canyon Trail, trails within Castle Crags State Park, College of the Siskiyou’s Bear Trail, Hedge Creek Falls, and the Great Shasta Rail Trail. There is a strong demand for trail-based recreation that the Forest Service and its partners are working to fill.

This year, the Mt. Shasta region will attract even more visitors by becoming the first official Pacific Crest Trail Town community. The 2,650-mile PCT is an international attraction that passes through our area. Long-distance hikers who trek all the way from Mexico to Canada stop here looking for a friendly place along the trail where they can pick up resupply boxes, take a shower, eat a good meal, have a cold beer and maybe even sleep in a normal bed for the night. Section-hikers, weekend backpackers and day-hikers head for local trailheads as well as local businesses for hiking gear and supplies.

The official introduction of the Mt. Shasta as a Pacific Crest Trail Town will take place at an event this coming July 21, at the peak of hiking season for the PCT. Details regarding the event are still being planned and will be announced when available.

This is good news for hiking enthusiasts, and it’s good news for our local economy too. An abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities holds real economic value for our communities. We have a high number of outstanding trails that can’t all be enjoyed in a day, so visitors often stay for several days and then come back again.

The Outdoor Industry Association's website states that in California, outdoor recreation is responsible for 691,000 jobs representing \$30.4 billion in wages and salaries, \$92 billion in consumer spending and \$6.2 billion in state and local tax revenue. Certainly as one of the premier outdoor recreation meccas of Northern California, our communities stand to be a significant recipient of those benefits.

Of course Mt. Shasta and surrounding communities are already trail towns. Being recognized by the PCTA as a Pacific Crest Trail Town helps strengthen that identity. We will confer additional benefits as our communities embrace that identity and build upon our love of trails.

– Priscila Franco is currently on the board of directors for the Pacific Crest Trail Association and is retired from the Forest Service where she worked 36 years in fire, timber, outdoor recreation and general management. She retired from the position of District Ranger in Mt. Shasta in 2011.

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