

## Jessica Rauch

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**Subject:** Visitor Center Experience Report

Good evening, Commissioners

My name is Marlyss Auster and I am President/ CEO of Visit Ventura. We are responsible for driving the economy of our Ventura through tourism dollars. We also operate a robust Visitor Center where we see over 20,000 visitors annually. I saw item #2 on your agenda and would like to support the board in exploring the opportunity and fully evaluate the option of expanding the Visitor Center on Parcel 8.

I have attached a recent Visitor Center impact study for your review and also shared this fact from the study with the Visit Ventura Board of Directors on November 8th.

Studies have shown the visitor center works to **increase economic impact:** features and activities at the visitor center encourage visitors to go to those places – more places and activities add up to more time and more money spent in the destination. Stops at a local visitor center can influence expanding visitors’ original itinerary, to stay longer - even overnight – and do more things than originally planned by hearing area “insider info” from local expert staff and informative displays

Thank you for your time and service in serving our Port District, which is an important asset we share to drive inspiration.

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## The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Visitor Center Experience

### A New Model for Visitor Center Relevance and Viability

By Lauren Schlau & Carl Ribaldo



The great American road trip! Pack the gear, get the family in the car and head out for an adventure never before experienced and much anticipated. See the sites and sights along the road, maybe stop for a meal and of course make a rest stop at the ubiquitous visitor information center.



Whether on the highway or in-town, these centers serve as a gateway to all the area has to offer, with friendly and informed staff offering useful information. For the adults, this is a place to pick up maps, brochures and other materials about where to go, what to do, maybe buy attraction tickets or even get that special deal only available at the center. To the kids this may not seem so exciting when all they want is to get to the main attraction, but is probably a welcome rest stop and they may find some fun local trinkets to get their parents to buy.

But that is so 20<sup>th</sup> century! Today most families turn on the internet and easily pre-plan their trip at home. Once on the road, a mobile phone with “an app for that” can provide a breadth of info and updates on where to go, and what to see and do. Why stop at a separate location, perhaps not easily accessible, for information readily available from home or on a device along the way?

While the demographic segment seeking a way-stop for maps, brochures and a restroom is on the decline, the wired segment, who can by-pass the center, is growing. As for the operators, visitor centers can be significant budget line-item expense; few generate sufficient revenue to break-even.

Since the advent of the internet and specifically smart mobile devices, destinations have had to recognize that the traditional visitor center has become stale and obsolete for a large share of the traveling public. Most centers are essentially static in presentation and offer information conveniently available elsewhere.

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### Building Visitor Center Relevance and Viability – A New Model

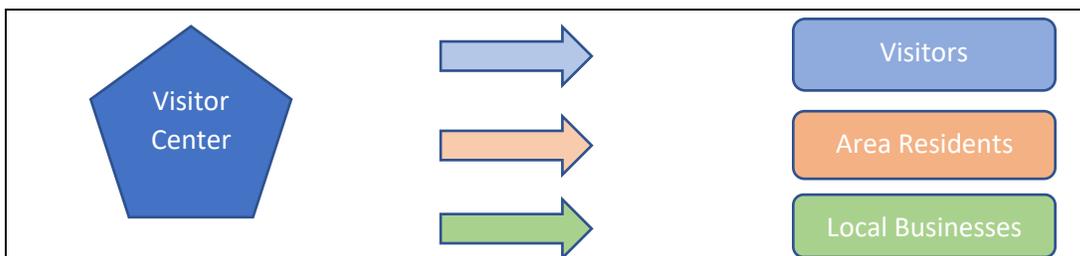
The question is, does a visitor center still fulfill a need, and if so, what is the new model for it to stay relevant and viable into the future?

The value proposition for a successful visitor center has relied on *volume* – highest exposure to the traveling public generating incremental potential economic benefit to the local area economy. The new model mind-set replaces volume with *yield*, based on targeted visitation driven by the center’s offerings and experience.

New creative thinking and strategic planning can transform the visitor center into a dynamic, relevant, cost effective, and even a must-see feature of the local experience. Some centers already have transitioned, integrating galleries, locally based crafts, upgraded tech and interactive experiences to attract and engage center visitors.



The new model positions the visitor center as an attraction, evolving into an integral component of the local visitor serving infrastructure, also attracting area residents, and forging more effective partnerships with local businesses.



In areas with an official destination marketing office (DMO), the visitor center can serve as the go-to source for visitor inquiries freeing the DMO from fielding or fulfilling (e.g., print materials, web resources, etc.). In places without an official DMO, the visitor center fills that role both on-line and for in-person experiences. Studies have shown that a visitor center can increase visitor economic impact by providing useful information that encourages visitors to engage in more activities and stay longer in the destination. While important, that is only part of the equation when viewing the visitor center as a mean to fulfill a much larger, more engaging and more meaningful role with its users and with the local community.



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### A Place for Engagement from Visitors, Residents and Local Businesses

Our experience providing such a blueprint for California Welcome Centers shows that a new type of visitor “experience center” is not only feasible but embraced by visitor center managers eager to create more involvement and activity within the center for visitors - and residents - alike. The transformation to interactive, locally specialized, and unique visitor experiences changes the visitor center perception and function, as well as its relevance and sustainability. With this model, the visitor center also improves leverage to attract a wider segment of local businesses who can benefit from increased direct exposure to their target visitor and resident markets, with partnership revenue supporting the visitor center via a pay-to-play funding model.

To break this down:

*Presenting interactive, local, specialized, unique experiences:* visitors seek out that which makes a destination unique and differentiates it from the other places on their trip itinerary. The better the visitor center features and promotes those singular destination offerings, the more likely visitors will engage and enjoy the destination experience, remember it and tell others about it. If presented well, in an engaging interactive format, the center experience itself can be part of that destination story when they return home (or even before then, on social media during the experience!). Such offerings can include specialized local retail shops, restaurants, live entertainment, local artists and craftspeople, neighborhoods, historical, cultural or scenic sites found nowhere else and must-sees. Such display media can include interactive screens, virtual reality, exhibitions and performances, sampling or even creating locally produced goods, etc.

*The visitor center works to increase economic impact:* features and activities at the visitor center encourage visitors to go to those places – more places and activities add up to more time and more money spent in the destination. Stops at a local visitor center can influence expanding visitors’ original itinerary, to stay longer - even overnight – and do more things than originally planned by hearing area “insider info” from local expert staff and informative displays.

*The visitor center has more leverage to attracts a wider segment of local businesses:*

*To visitors:* The visitor center model built on attracting people to be exposed to the featured offerings is important to local visitor serving businesses, many to small without the resources to market directly to visitors. Featuring such businesses at the visitor center with engaging displays and interactivity can make the business a must-see; they also can offer special discounts at the center available nowhere else. The center would develop a fee schedule to charge businesses for featured positions, with varying amounts based on display type and duration. This gives businesses the incentive to sign-on and reap the rewards of increased visitor activity and revenue.

*To residents:* in addition to non-local visitors, the center can also attract local residents for a three-fold benefit. One, is to expose residents to local businesses and events they may not know of or attend. Two, as many residents also host visitors or refer friends and family to local attractions, venues and events, the visitor center serves as an important information source for residents as well. Three, the resident gets to enjoy the center experience and being in the company of visitors, both can learn more about one another.

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A recent article, *12 Things Successful Visitor Centres Do Differently*, by Rebecca White \* documents examples of how visitor centers transition to a popular and engaging experience, as summarized below.

### Offerings:

- Virtual reality tours
- Colorful memorable rest rooms
- Stories that visitor centers could potentially curate and share with those who visit include:
  - **People Stories** – Indigenous, Early Settlers, Historic Figures, and Living Icons
  - **Place Stories** – Indigenous perspective, Geography, Geology, Flora, Fauna, History and Heritage
  - **Produce Stories** – Local Industries, Food, Wine, Beverages, Craft, and Art
- Provide experiences outside of the center in the destination that the market is not providing

### Financially Sustainable

Successful visitor centres are developing multiple streams of income with the goal of becoming financially sustainable, with less or no reliance on public funds to operate.

Various revenue streams successful Visitor Centres include:

- **Industry Contributions.** Via their Industry Prospectus such as having brochures racking. Where resources are available, they also provide fee-for-service support, such as helping with listing set up, Google My Business and TripAdvisor Training.
- **Booking Commission.** Via Online Bookings, Face to Face Bookings, Event Tickets, Owned Product Packaging + Distribution
- **Retails Sales + Gift Packages.** Sold either offline (in VIC, at Events) or online via the website.
- **Own Product Sales.** Entrance Fees, Own Tour Products (only where market gaps exist) such as Guiding Service (groups), Hire, Transport, Walking Tours
- **Advertising Opportunities.** In Centre - Posters, Window Projections, Touchscreen, Print.
- **Venue Hire.** If they have venue space, hire it out for local events.

*\* this post was originally written in December 2018 and updated in August 2020. (<https://tourismeschool.com/blog/12-things-successful-visitor-centres-do-differently/>)*

Another opportunity with the shift to electric vehicles is for visitor centers to install car chargers as a convenient location to charge the car and have the visitor center experience. A cooperative network of charging locations can be developed among area visitor centers.



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### Blueprint To Achieve a Visitor Experience Center

For the center to successfully function in new ways, it must consider a range of physical, operational and marketing elements it may not have, including:

#### Elements

- **Inventory** unique places, sites and things to do in the area, especially those “off the beaten track”
- From this inventory develop the key offerings and the “**story**” of the destination that becomes the theme (brand) for visitors, residents and local businesses within the visitor center
  - Engage local graphic arts and fine artists to help develop the look of the story and offerings
- Conduct a search of the types of engaging **interactive displays/demonstrations** the VC can offer to businesses and artists.
- Reach out to **local visitor serving businesses** (or those who can potentially be) and assess their interest in promoting in the VC in what format and at what price-point.
- Develop a **fee schedule** by type of displays to be offered and by duration (monthly half-year, annual, etc.)
- Develop a **marketing package** to promote to local businesses.
- Develop a **marketing plan** to promote to the traveling public – through the area DMO or independently

#### Operations

- operational plan to execute and sustain the operation
- center staffing plan: staff will need to expand beyond a manager and a few dedicated staff. Part of the operational plan is to identify staffing by function and can include:
  - business development/partnerships
  - experience curator
- metrics to measure the impacts and results for operations, planning and programming

### We Can Help

While this list of to-dos is extensive and may seem daunting, we can help! Our marketing research and strategic experience can be applied to help ensure your visitor center’s relevance and sustainability:

- develop the overall plan: mission, vision, uses, positioning
- work with the local community to develop interest, participation and available inventory
- research and recommend interactive displays
- develop staffing plan/structure
- set the business fee schedule
- develop financial feasibility
- oversee developing marketing and promotional materials



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We are happy to discuss this with you. Please contact Carl Ribaudo at [carl@smgonline.net](mailto:carl@smgonline.net) or Lauren Schlau at [laurens@lsconsult.com](mailto:laurens@lsconsult.com).

