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What 2016 holds for Atascadero — a talk with Mayor Tom O'Malley

Atascadero Mayor Tom O'Malley says the city's focus on marketing itself is key to economic growth

The city has embarked on new and revamped events, a coordinated marketing plan and zoo renovations

Bringing in new businesses and construction of the Del Rio commercial center also are economic drivers



Atascadero Mayor Tom O'Malley in front of Atascadero founder E.G. Lewis' desk in his office at City Hall. **Joe Johnston** jjohnston@thetribunenews.com

BY NICK WILSON

nwilson@thetribunenews.com

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In 2015, Atascadero’s mayor was a strong advocate for the city’s efforts to rebrand itself and boost its marketing as a way to attract more visitors and improve the local economy. That work continues as the city moves forward in 2016.

Atascadero has brought in marketing consultants, hired a new deputy city manager to reinvigorate public events, and invested in the zoo and other city-owned properties to raise its profile in San Luis Obispo County and bring in more visitors.

Mayor [Tom O’Malley](#) said the campaign also includes encouraging new businesses to take a look at Atascadero and all it has to offer.

“We try to be business friendly,” O’Malley said. “We want our city to be as independent as it can. That has to be with economic independence.”

In a recent interview, O’Malley noted some key developments that helped improve the business climate in Atascadero last year and that will continue to be a focus this year and into the future.

Events and the Zoo

In 2015, Atascadero began revamping and increasing the number of citywide events to encourage more visitors to come to town. A new deputy city manager position was created to focus on outreach, promotions and events and was filled by [Terrie Banish](#), who was hired in April.

Banish is helping retool some of the city’s traditional events, such as Colony Days and Hot El Camino Cruise Nite, and to create new events, such as this year’s Tamale Festival, [which drew about 7,000](#) people in January. She also has been

tasked with helping to carry out a marketing plan with a goal to get visitors to “Stay, spend and enjoy!”

The city has invested in advertising on interior signage on the 16 buses that travel to and from Hearst Castle several times a day. More than 700,000 people visit the Castle each year, and Atascadero hopes to attract some of those tourists who might be planning to venture out to Paso Robles for wine tasting or to San Luis Obispo for a night on the town.

“What better way to remind those visitors as they travel to the top of the Enchanted Hill that we have the only zoo on the Central Coast and we have one of the most historic buildings, being City Hall, and the only veterans memorial, the Faces of Freedom,” Banish said.

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Tom O'Malley, Atascadero mayor

O'Malley said the city also will focus on using [Atascadero Lake Park](#) to host festivities because the venue has plenty of space and can accommodate thousands of people.

The city-owned [Charles Paddock Zoo](#), located within the park, also is undergoing upgrades in an effort to draw more locals and tourists. Improvements in recent months have included a remodeled [aviary exhibit](#), which reopened Feb. 20 with new exotic birds, and a [new turtle lab](#). A new red panda exhibit also is in the works.

“The city’s job is to provide the infrastructure to support events,” O'Malley said. “We see the Atascadero Lake Park and zoo as a place where can hold a lot more events. You can do larger events out there.”

The city’s assets, as defined in a recent marketing plan, are the downtown core with historic City Hall, Galaxy Theatre, Charles Paddock Zoo, Faces of Freedom Veterans Memorial, Atascadero Lake Park, Pavilion on the Lake, A-Town Skate Park and Chalk Mountain Golf Course.

Improved Marketing

Over the past year, the city has focused its efforts on strategically marketing Atascadero to raise its profile in the county to attract new businesses and draw more visitors to its restaurants, shops and events.

The city hired a consultant, the Coraggio Group, based in Portland, Ore., to work with the city on its promotions, branding and logo and to help develop a strategic plan. The city has spent about \$31,500 for the consultant's services to date.

The city has also partnered with the [Atascadero Chamber of Commerce](#) and its [Tourism Business Improvement District](#), which collects lodging fees for marketing purposes, to highlight local businesses and events.

O'Malley, a business owner himself who operates Portola Inn in Atascadero, said several new businesses have opened up in the city in recent months and years, including new restaurants, breweries and a gym.

"We just have had a rebirth of entrepreneurship," O'Malley said. "There are a number of restaurants and other businesses opening up, including some with younger owners."

O'Malley said the marketing efforts have helped attract the interest of several hotel chains.

"Marriott announced they were opening a new hotel," O'Malley said. "Additional hotels are interested, and we'll hear more about that in another year or two."

The marketing plan for this year focuses on promoting events from March through September with TV advertising and digital outreach, growing online search traffic related to city activities, and a retargeted social media plan. Email blasts for events such as Brew at the Zoo and Dancing in the Streets are included in the efforts.

Advertisements to attract tourists also will come in the form of billboards in "feeder markets" such as King City, Salinas and Santa Maria.

"Atascadero is a classic American family-friendly town offering something for the whole family to enjoy," the latest marketing plan states.

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Del Rio Commercial Center

O'Malley said the city is anticipating strong progress on the Del Rio commercial center at El Camino Real and Del Rio, which is expected to bring in about \$1 million a year in tax revenues to the city once it's built. The project is progressing in the later planning stages, though it may not break ground this year, said developer Clint Pearce of Madonna Enterprises.

The new center at Del Rio and El Camino Real will include stores such as Walmart, which has not been without controversy. Opponents of the Walmart project say it would impact the area's roads, air quality and noise levels. Supporters welcome the revenues the store may bring and its potential ability to help Atascadero's economic growth.

Walmart's final map, which will include a detailed road and site improvement plan, is expected to be brought before the City Council in June.

"We're talking with lots of retailers and restaurants but none to announce (as to which will go into the center)," Pearce said in an email.

The project will provide people with the incentive to stay local and shop in town, O'Malley said.

"The best thing we can do for our environment is to improve our job, housing and shopping balance," O'Malley said. "If we get the shopping in our own town that our residents want, and meet all of our needs, and reduce vehicle miles that much, it's a huge impact on the environment."

Downtown changes in 2016 to add 'connectivity'

O'Malley said the city continues to work to improve its downtown, adding new infrastructure and a new sign ordinance.

A new project in the planning stages will add a pedestrian bridge from the Colony Square shopping center to the Sunken Gardens, along with construction of a plaza, reconstruction and expansion of the City Hall parking lot and a walking trail along the creek between El Camino Real and Lewis Avenue.

"What we're looking at with this is connectivity," O'Malley said. "We have our transit center right down the street. And you can go to lots of cute little

restaurants by walking, faster than you can get in a car and drive around just because of the traffic.”

On Tuesday, the City Council will consider whether to approve the project’s design and award an engineering design contract, with the expectation that construction will start in spring 2017. More than \$3 million in remaining 2010 redevelopment bond funds would be used.

A sign ordinance in 2015 cleaned up a litter of so-called “sandwich” signs, or A-frame signs, erected on city sidewalks to promote city business. The new policy allows temporary signs for up to 30 days that must be taken down for the next 60 days.

O’Malley said the city worked to slash fees and expedite the process of creating permanent signage as an incentive to business owners using A-frame signs. Costs for building permits for signage were lowered by almost 90 percent to \$50 over an 18-month period, announced in September. Atascadero also now partners with local sign companies to “submit building permit applications digitally, cutting signage review time frames to less than 48 hours,” according to the city’s website.

Significant outreach to businesses on the changes led to widespread support for and cooperation with the new ordinance.

“I put that under my biggest surprise of 2015,” O’Malley said. “If you tell somebody they can’t do something, often you’ll get that ‘Oh, boy.’ ”

The Atascadero mayor said that he also enjoys the city’s spirit of community and volunteerism, reflected in various communitywide projects.

“People here have a lot of pride in their community,” O’Malley said.

Nick Wilson: [805-781-7922](tel:805-781-7922), [@NickWilsonTrib](https://twitter.com/NickWilsonTrib)

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