

Big Fan of China

City of L.A. got jump on tourism efforts in 2006 with overseas office. **By CAROLINE ANDERSON** Staff Reporter

UNTIL a couple of years ago, the maps most frequently picked up at the **J. Paul Getty Museum** in a language other than English were in French and German.

Now, Chinese has surpassed those European mainstays, said **David Singleman**, the museum's group and tourism coordinator.

The change represents a dramatic increase in Chinese tourists to Los Angeles over the past decade.

"They have such a pent-up desire to travel," Singleman said.

Last year, Los Angeles County welcomed more than 1 million Chinese visitors, beating out San Francisco and New York, the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board announced this month.

The board, based in downtown, foresaw this potential tourism boom years earlier as China was loosening its travel restrictions. Los Angeles became the only U.S. city to get a license to market directly to Chinese residents in 2006, opening its first office there. The tourism board now plans to open its fourth Chinese outpost, in the city of Chengdu, in May with the hope of expanding into the market even further.

"When you look at China then and now, the Los Angeles tourism board's timing couldn't have been more spot on," said **Kathryn Smits**, vice president of international tourism at the board, which is the city's official direct marketing organization. "Based on the sheer size of China, it was the perfect timing to get there from the ground up. The market just keeps growing."

The tourism board's eight employees at its offices in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, staffed by Chinese nationals, focus on pitching Los Angeles as a destination to travel agents and tour operators. They try to get the city featured in Chinese media, as they did with webisode series "It Takes Entertainment to Travel," which got millions of views in China, and maintain accounts on big Chinese social media platforms WeChat and Weibo.

The China team also helps the tourism board work with airlines to increase direct flights from locations including Chengdu,



Opened Up: Kathryn Smits at the downtown office of the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board.

RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

which has a population of almost 8 million.

Their efforts helped make Chinese visitors the second-largest group of international tourists in Los Angeles last year, behind only Mexicans. The county of Los Angeles hosted 47.3 million tourists in total last year, including 7.1 million international visitors.

Chinese visitors also stayed longer and arrived in larger groups than their counterparts from other countries. They stayed 7.3 nights versus the average 6.5 for other overseas travelers, and on average came in groups of 2.4 people versus the overall average of 1.9, according to the tourism board.

Direct spending in Los Angeles by Chinese

visitors was \$1.3 billion in 2015, the board said. That number is expected to grow as the Chinese middle class and discretionary spending increases.

Seeing opening

China wasn't the first country where the tourism board decided to launch a foreign outpost. At the time, it had offices in Tokyo and London.

Then-Mayor **Antonio Villaraigosa** saw an opportunity in 2006 as China was preparing to lift restrictions on leisure travel to the United States, opening L.A.'s first tourism office there during a historic trade mission.

The tourism board hoped its Beijing oper-

ation would help capitalize on what was predicted to be a flood of Chinese travelers around the world. At the time, Chinese visitors to Los Angeles numbered just 110,000 a year.

The move was a culmination of a long courtship by mayors going back to Tom Bradley, according to **Steven Cheung**, **World Trade Center Los Angeles** president.

"Previous mayors – Bradley, (**James Hahn**), (**Richard Riordan**) – all had government-to-government relationships," said Cheung. "You can't just go in there and expect to do business."

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Realtors Want to Make Homes for Middle Class

HOUSING: Forum will look at how high costs of living drive out L.A. businesses.

By HELEN ZHAO Staff Reporter

The lack of affordable housing for middle-class workers in Los Angeles is weighing on the minds of the region's real estate agents.

Southland Regional Association of Realtors, a local trade group for brokers, plans to address the issue at its Housing Our Workers Forum on Feb. 8 at the Airtel Plaza Hotel in Van Nuys. Various stakeholders will be on hand, including officials from L.A.'s Department of City Planning and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Developers, a **Fannie Mae** executive, and neighborhood activists will join them to discuss ways to spur the construction of affordable housing for middle-class workers in California and keep businesses from leaving the region.

"There are no government programs or

market forces working in your favor to assist in the development of (middle-class) housing," said **Paul Habibi**, a lecturer in real estate and finance at **UCLA**.

The trade group defines middle-class workers as those with an annual household income between \$60,000 and \$120,000 a year. Affordable housing for the middle class in Los Angeles would cost \$500,000 or less, according to **Mel Wilson**, of brokerage **Mel Wilson & Associates** in Northridge and government affairs director of the Realtors association.

The median county home price in December was \$545,000, according to Redfin, compared with \$267,000 nationally.

Wilson said businesses often opt to move out of state when they can't find enough workers in their area.

"They're in this bubble where they make too much to qualify for subsidized housing but they don't make enough to afford market-rate housing," Wilson said of L.A.'s middle class.

"A number of other states are aggressively marketing to attract businesses from California for a whole host of reasons: the regulations



'A number of other states are aggressively marketing to attract businesses from California.'

MEL WILSON, Mel Wilson & Associates

in California, the cost of doing business in California, and the housing costs," he said.

It has worked in several cases, as large

employers have moved their headquarters out of California, citing lack of affordable housing as one of the reasons. **Toyota Motor Corp.** announced plans to relocate its Torrance headquarters to Plano, Texas, in 2014. **Jacobs Engineering Group Inc.** also has plans to move its headquarters from Pasadena to Dallas by the end of 2019 and cut its local staff by more than a third.

Wilson argued bringing down housing costs requires an increase in supply, noting that community members should have more opportunities to offer input to the Department of City Planning regarding the future of their neighborhoods.

That would mitigate the type of backlash against future developments that has resulted in Measure S, he said, referring to a March ballot initiative that would impose severe restrictions on new developments in the city of Los Angeles for two years.

The Housing Our Workers Forum will be co-hosted by the **National Association of Realtors**, **Valley Economic Alliance**, and **BizFed Institute**.