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Visitor industry hopes to bolster workforce by recruiting teens

By Allison Schaefer
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Hawaii's visitor industry is looking for a few good kids to become the state's next top tourism workers and, hopefully, leaders. Leadership, Exploration, Inspiration, which is part of the ClimbHI program, wants to step up its game by reaching out to even younger students across Hawaii for potential careers in the state's largest industry: travel and tourism. Despite Hawaii's tourism dependency, preliminary surveys show that many students don't see a future for themselves in the state's visitor industry.

Each spring ClimbHI's LEI events introduces about 1,000 junior and senior high school students to visitor industry careers. On Thursday the program piloted a career development assembly for freshmen, connecting 400 Roosevelt High School students with 10 business owners and three post-secondary institutions.

The idea is to catch the students before they are already considering other career paths and post-secondary educational programs.

The event, which looked more like a rock concert



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Roosevelt High School students Rashaad Burgess, left, Tani Siu, Dayven Horn and Jackie Lee model clothes that would be appropriate in the workplace or for an interview. The ClimbHI program put on an assembly at the school for the freshmen class to get more information about hospitality programs and career pathways.

than a traditional assembly, was timed to ensure travel and tourism would be top of mind a couple of weeks from now when students have the chance to enroll in one of six career and technical education (CTE) pathways offered by the state Department of Education, where students can earn dual college credits in dozens of programs.

ClimbHI President and CEO Julie Morikawa said she

started the nonprofit in 2012 to inspire students to finish high school and proceed to postsecondary education or successful employment. "The visitor industry opened up new worlds for me," said Morikawa, who went to Cornell University, which led to a successful career in tech and travel. "As a local student, I never would have dreamed this was possible." Earlier this year Morikawa

took the program online. Next she would like to get a freshmen school assembly in every Hawaii public school. "This was a pilot to test proof of concept for the Hawaii Tourism Authority, which gave us the funding for one assembly," Morikawa said. "It's really important to catch students early when they are making critical decisions about their future." DOE numbers show that

overall CTE enrollment numbers are highest in the hospitality and tourism concentration. However, the results vary across the schools.

Shane Yang, a 17-year-old student in Roosevelt's CTE program, said the assembly was needed because Roosevelt's CTE enrollment numbers for travel and tourism are low.

"We did a pre-survey, and many students didn't know what hospitality was," Yang said. "That's shocking when it's such a big part of Hawaii and there's lots to offer." Lori Shimomura-Sakamoto, who coordinates Roosevelt's CTE hospitality program, said this year's program enrollment was thin, but with the help of programs like LEI, she's hoping to grow the program to 120 students.

"I think they loved the assembly. It should help spark additional interest," Shimomura-Sakamoto said.

Part of the reason that ClimbHI has been able to offer more to Hawaii students is that the nonprofit has gotten increased support for its LEI program from the Hawaii Tourism Authority. New opportunities also are coming by way of the Hawaii Lodging & Tourism Association

and a host of Hawaii travel and tourism businesses — all of which are aware that historically low levels of unemployment have led to a tight labor market that could stymie plans for continued visitor industry growth.

Caroline Anderson, HTA director of community enrichment, said the agency has put more emphasis on workforce development than ever before. She said HTA has increased its contribution to ClimbHI and LEI to \$104,000 for fiscal year 2020.

ClimbHI and LEI also align with the new He'olima Scholarships, a \$500,000 endowment launched with the Hawaii Lodging & Tourism Association, Anderson said. And, by year's end HTA plans to issue a request for proposals to find a contractor to do a study on the visitor industry's workforce development needs.

"There's a realization that tourism will always be our No. 1 industry and the sector for the foreseeable future that provides the most jobs," said HEITA, President and CEO Mull Harnemann. "If we want to fill them, we have to start early. Unemployment is low and the industry is growing."

MARKET

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Then there's the advent of the more intrepid tourist who wants a more "local" vacation, fueling visitor interest in hotels outside of Maui's traditional resort markets.

Business development in Waialua, Kahului and central Kihui, near the Maui Research and Technology Park, have increased the need to serve more business travelers. And, crackdowns in illegal rentals — voters last year approved increasing penalties for illegal short-term rentals to an initial fee of up to \$20,000, plus \$10,000 per day — have decreased the number of places to stay for those attending sporting or other events or whose friends and family don't have rooms to spare.

Amazing pricing power
These trends, coupled with shrinking room supply, have created a market

Residence Inn in the country. When they started, their nightly fees were a lot less than other Waialua hotels, but demand was so great their fees went up," said Bud Pikeone, Waialua Community Association general manager. "They are surprising everyone, and that's why people are looking at building new hotels using that model in other Maui locations. They might not get the same amount of money as in Waialua, but they'll get more than they normally would on the mainland."

Mark Bratton, Colliers International senior vice president, said he knows of at least three or four select and limited-service hotel projects that were planned to chase after the success of the Residence Inn as well as the earlier Courtyard Marriott Kahului. "There's a lot planned for Maui," Bratton said. "Strong rates and a diverse market have made it very popular with investors and developers."

ple, we think there's room for new hotels positioned around interest in Kahului, Waialua, Kihui and Upcountry Maui."

Jonathan Starr, former chairman of the Maui Planning Commission now turned hotel partner, said he's working to bring a 156-room, internationally branded hotel, possibly a Hilton Garden Inn, to Waialua. Starr said he's helping the project, which is oriented to business travelers and families with ties to the town, could begin construction in 2020 and open the following year.

"We know there are several hundred people on Maui for business that would like to be in Central Maui, but most of them are staying in Waialua, Kaanapali or Kihui. When people are traveling to their lodging on the west or south side, it puts a lot of rental cars on the road," Starr said. "It's much more efficient and environmentally preferable if people stay in a hotel where they could walk or

this year or asking visitors to make pledges that they'll behave," Vieira said.

He said Maui doesn't have situations like on Hawaii island where protesters are blocking Thirty Meter Telescope progress on Mauna Kea. It's also not like Oahu where protesters are impeding construction of sports facilities at Sherwood Forest and in Kahuku, where opponents are trying to halt expansion of a wind farm.

Maui residents haven't mounted major protests recently. But that doesn't mean everyone is on board with hotel expansion or that they are even aware of it, said Dick Mayer, a Kula resident who formerly served on both the Maui General Plan Advisory Committee and Maui Planning Commission.

In the spring, when the Grand Waialua Resort sought to add 224 rooms, Mayer was among those who testified against the project. He also plans to testify against the Windward Hotel planned for Kahuku when it is slated to go before the planning



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM
Calvin Hoe and his family hosted the convoy at Kulaoa Regional Park. "What we're trying to do is encourage every person here to be a leader," said Hoe, the owner of Waiahole Pot Factory and a longtime activist. "That's going to be the strength of our movement."

PROTEST

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proposal for play fields at Waimanalo's Sherwood Forest and a planned wind farm in Kahuku. She said the movement was inspired by the battle against the TMT telescope on Mauna Kea. Calvin Hoe, owner of Waiahole Pot Factory, and his family hosted the convoy at the park at the request of the organizers because the

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