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BODY:

Population growth topped the list of valley residents' concerns, which were presented Friday at the "Sixth Day of Discussion on the Future of the Coachella Valley."

The concern is warranted, according to panelists who addressed a crowd of residents and community leaders in a meeting room at Fantasy Springs Casino in Indio. The current year-round population of about 367,000 is expected to jump to nearly 550,000 by 2020, increasing traffic and housing costs and straining public safety and educational resources.

"Development is a good thing, as long as it doesn't kill our golden goose," said Gary Sherwin, vice president of marketing development for the Palm Springs Desert Resorts Convention and Visitors Authority.

Tourism remains the valley's largest industry, bringing in 3.5 million overnight visitors a year. The area's draw depends on it remaining a destination for "fun, beauty, glamour and relaxation," Sherwin said.

Sherwin was joined on the panel by John Wohlmuth, executive director of the Coachella Valley Association of Governments; Terry Green, assistant dean of desert programs at UCR; Neil Lingle, assistant sheriff for the Riverside County Sheriff's Department; and Robert Marra, publisher of "Wheeler's Desert Letter."

Another panel that included Mark Nichols, chief executive officer of the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, discussed issues surrounding tribal and state relationships.

The data presented at the conference was gathered from a telephone survey of 400 valley residents last month. The randomly selected respondents represented a cross-section of ages, incomes and ethnicity, and questions ranged from immigration issues to opinions of city governments and services.

Eighteen percent of those surveyed named population growth as the most serious problem facing the Coachella Valley. Water issues and crime tied for second place with 14 percent. Traffic, gas,

education, electricity, cost of living and air pollution were also cited.

Ninety-one percent of respondents said they felt that traffic in the valley had gotten much worse in recent years. More than 50 percent said they were concerned about both water supply and water quality.

However, the majority of those questioned also said they believe the Coachella Valley will be a better place to live over the next five years, and 82 percent said they felt optimistic or very optimistic about the future of their city.

"What we are going over here is just a narrow slice of the results," said Ralph Rossum, director of the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, which conducted the survey. The institute has done similar research in communities throughout Southern California, including five others in the Coachella Valley dating back to 1998.

The surveys essentially "take the temperature" of the community, Rossum said.

"(Agencies) will go over them to get a better sense of how they can use the data to improve public service," he said.

GRAPHIC: RODRIGO PENA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER / El Paseo Avenue in Palm Desert is a draw in the Coachella Valley. The future of the valley is the subject of a discussion involving residents, officials and community leaders.; PHOTO

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