

Bay Area mayors travel to China

Mission is to promote economic strengths and attract investors

BY JUDITH PRIEVE

JPRIEVE@BAYAREANEWSGROUP.COM

Businesses in China may have never heard of East Contra Costa County, but they soon will as a small group of Bay Area mayors, including ones from Antioch and Oakley, traveled there this week to promote the area's economic strengths with hopes of attracting new investors and fostering business ties.

Organized by China Silicon Valley, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Silicon Valley with branches in Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the trip is the first the group has taken since the COVID-19 pandemic. This year's tour focuses on the green development of cities, business expansion and deepening international relationships through sister-city partnerships.

Though Antioch has no sister city in China, Mayor Lamar Hernandez-Thorpe said he sees the value in building such relationships, something he learned more about during a recent U.S. Conference of Mayors gathering in Washington, D.C., and a visit with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"He said the best way mayors can help in international relations was partnerships because the best way of foreign policy is one-on-one engagement and people getting to know each other," Hernandez-Thorpe said. "So I'm taking to heart the secretary's recommendation."

Shortly before departure Sunday for the one-week trip, the Antioch mayor said he will be focusing on promoting strategic trade, the area's economic strengths and potential job expansion. He also plans to showcase East Contra Costa's Glydways micro transit system that will connect Pittsburg, Antioch, Brentwood and Oakley.

Others on the trip include Oakley Mayor Anissa Williams, San Carlos Mayor Adam Rak, East Palo Alto Mayor Antonio López, Saratoga Mayor Yan Zhao, Morgan Hill Mayor Pro Tem Marilyn Librers and Silicon Valley business leaders. The trips were paid for by the China-United States Exchange Foundation, a nonprofit based in Hong Kong.

The delegation is expected to tour several major cities and participate in a number of events, including meetings with local government officials and business leaders from some of the fast-growing cities, including in Hong Kong and Mainland China.

While there, Hernandez-Thorpe said he plans to promote Antioch's deepwater port, Amports' expanded marine terminal, access to the BNSF railway and the planned construction of two major commercial warehouses.

"It's not some small thing that Amports now has a marine terminal here in Antioch," he said. "And, I think for Oakley, it's not a small thing that they have a logistics warehousing facility that's anchored by Amazon."

Hernandez-Thorpe said that while Amports, one of the world's largest automotive shipping companies, has been storing new cars in Antioch for a number of months, it was only last week that it brought cars there by ship after expanding the wharf to accommodate roll-on and roll-off traffic. The first vessel brought nearly 1,500 new Buicks from China and the cars will later be trucked to their destinations.

"Right now they're using Antioch as a place to kind of bypass," he said. "The goal in their second phase will be connecting to BNSF rail, so that they can directly send them to the East Coast using rail lines instead of semi trucks."

The first phase will be a pilot program to see the impacts from the ships, while the second phase of the project includes building an offloading car facility, where workers will process the cars before going off to market, the mayor said.

"For a long time, people have said, 'Why doesn't Antioch utilize its deepwater ports?'" Hernandez-Thorpe said. "Clearly, there's an opportunity here and Amports saw it and, from my perspective ... if there's an opportunity and it's cheaper, why not?"

Not only will the offloading car facility provide some 40 jobs, but the marine industry has a multiplier effect, creating more jobs regionally as a result, he said.

"It's kind of replicating what's happening in Benicia," the mayor said of Amports' similar Benicia facility.

In addition, two 450,000-square-foot warehouses suitable for advanced manufacturing, light industrial and more are about to break ground on East 18th Street, Hernandez-Thorpe said.

"There's still a lot of flexibility for businesses to come in here," he said, noting it's a point he will make during his talks with Chinese business leaders.