

CSU CONSULTANTS IN CHULA VISTA TO VIEW UNIVERSITY POTENTIAL

Visit met with pitch by city that's among 5 areas under review

BY GUSTAVO SOLIS

CHULA VISTA

Chula Vista is on a short-list of cities that could get a California State University campus, and last week the city had a chance to put its best foot forward when officials visited the South Bay for a fact-finding mission.

Consultants working with CSU to determine whether the system needs another campus — and, if so, where to place it — met last week with elected officials, city staff, members of the local business community and other stakeholders to find out what Chula Vista has to offer.

"It's a huge deal; the fact that Chula Vista is in the mix is extremely encouraging," said Cindy Gompers-Graves, CEO of the South County Economic Development Council.

Chula Vista has tried to lure a four-year university to the South Bay for years and has even set aside a 39-acre plot of land to encourage public and private universities to consider moving south. Bringing a university to the South Bay is one of the City Council's priorities.

Last year, the state Legislature funded a \$4 million feasibility study to find out if and where to add a new campus to address overcrowding issues and increase access to higher education.

There's no guarantee that CSU will have a new campus. The study could conclude that the CSU system does not need another campus or that it would be more appropriate to add a satellite campus.

However, if there is a need for a new campus, the consultants were asked to evaluate five possible locations: Chula Vista, Stockton, Concord, Palm Desert and somewhere in San Mateo County.

Consultants working with CSU were asked to take into account local demand for higher education, workforce needs, potential operating costs, long-term enrollment projections, available funding sources and local support for a university.

Chula Vista's pitch to CSU?

"Location, location, location," said Eric Crockett, the city's director of economic development.

Crockett said Chula Vista is in the middle of the "Baja mega region," a binational space that is home to more than 6 million people with interests such as kinesiology, environmental sciences, immigration, international relations and business.

Additionally, Chula Vista is able to draw from a binational student population and prepare them to work in international industries like manufacturing, trade, tourism, medicine, aerospace and biotech.

Crockett added that Chula Vista has the availability of "free land, which we estimate conservatively at about \$400 million," and the use of the Elite Athlete Training Center for student use. On top of that, CSU would have the opportunity to "develop for-profit housing and commercial space that could generate annual lease revenues to the university for ongoing operational and maintenance costs."

To sell this vision to the CSU consultants, the city organized a roundtable event between community stakeholders and the consultants working on the study at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center — near the city's University and Innovation District.

About 65 people attended Tuesday's discussions.

They included staffers from local state Assembly and state Senate representatives as well as county Supervisor Greg Cox's office. There were also representatives from local school districts, Southwestern College and economic development organizations like the South County Economic Development Council, the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation and the local Chamber of Commerce.

At the meeting, consultants and stakeholders broke up into four groups focused on workforce, the economy, education and development opportunities.

The educational group discussed the fact that existing institutions are not

meeting the needs of students who need greater access to higher education. The workforce groups talked about the need for more capacity to turn out more local talent in order to fill available jobs that stay vacant because there aren't enough students with degrees to meet demand.

Gompers-Graves, who participated in the economic opportunities groups, was encouraged by the fact that the state is taking a serious look at the South Bay.

"South County residents should celebrate the fact that we are one of a few sites in California being looked at and acknowledge that the state has put these resources into this effort," she said.

After the roundtable discussions, consultants met individually with some City Council members.

"I believe that we have made an incredibly strong case," said Councilman John McCann.

It's important to note that this study will not actually recommend specific locations. Instead, it will simply compile information on each possible location and submit it to the state Legislature by July.

Once the feasibility study makes its way to Sacramento, the process could get political.

Mayor Mary Casillas Salas said it's important for South Bay officials to put pressure on the Legislature so that they don't forget about Chula Vista.

"A lot of times, it is not about the best site, but who has the most political clout," she said.

Salas has personally been working on bringing a university to the South Bay since 2002, when then-mayor Stephen Padilla appointed her to a committee when she was on the City Council. Salas continued to push for a South Bay university in her time at the state Assembly and now as mayor.

She described Tuesday's meeting as a big deal, but also made it clear that there are no guarantees.

"It makes me feel more hopeful than we've ever been," she said. "It gets us that much closer to having a four-year university here."