

CANADIANS in CALIFORNIA

By Phil Pitchford



Canadian business leaders and representatives of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, along with other elected officials from around the county, sign a bilateral agreement that calls for the Canada California Business Council to promote Riverside County to Canadian business interests.

RIVERSIDE COUNTY BOOSTED ITS STRONG RELATIONSHIP with Canadian businesses and entrepreneurs recently by signing a **bilateral trade agreement** that calls for a group of Canadian business executives to showcase the county to Canadian firms interested in getting involved with foreign trade and foreign direct investment. Members of the **Riverside County Board of Supervisors** signed the agreement with the **Canada California Business Council** as part of the business council's annual *Celebrity Golf Classic*, which was held in the Coachella Valley for the first time this year at the Desert Dunes Golf Club in Desert Hot Springs.

“Canadians feel a real sense of urgency to invest in the Sunbelt states, and our job is to point them in this direction.”

— **LEE FRASER**
PRESIDENT, CCBC

The Board of Supervisors emphasized their willingness to work with Canadian firms in exporting products from Riverside County to Canada and in promoting tourism destinations around Riverside County to Canadian travelers.

The agreement calls for the business council to help Riverside County and state and local officials increase the amount of exports of Riverside County goods to Canada, which already is the top importer of goods from the county.

“People in Canada say, ‘Canada, eh,’ but down here, we say ‘Canada yay!’” said **Tom Freeman**, Riverside County’s Foreign

Trade Commissioner and a key organizer of the event with the CCBC.

The Riverside County Economic Development Agency’s Office of Foreign Trade worked for months with the CCBC to bring the tournament from Los Angeles County to the Coachella Valley. Next year’s tournament has tentatively been scheduled for March 2, 2013, and will likely cap a two-day conference devoted to trade between Riverside County and Canada.

The tournament was a fundraiser for March of Dimes Canada, and past tournaments that have been televised in Canada have been viewed by as many as

800,000 Canadians. Organizers hope television coverage of the tournament back in Canada will encourage even more Canadians to make their winter homes in the Coachella Valley.

“Canadians feel a real sense of urgency to invest in the Sunbelt states, and our job is to point them in this direction,” said **Lee Fraser**, an executive with Warner Bros. who is founder and president of the Canada California Business Council. “We want to help Canadians help the state of California, and the Coachella Valley is a gateway to California for Canadians.”

The tournament ended up in the Coachella Valley after Fraser was introduced to Freeman by the Canadian consulate. The two began discussing how Riverside County and Canadian business people could work together more closely “and the rest is history,” Fraser said.

“This represents a lot of work by a lot of people who make this happen,” Fraser said. “We are thrilled to be here. This is all about partnerships.”

The golf tournament, held Feb. 10-11, was covered extensively by Canadian television. In a month when the temperature in Canada is often in

the single digits, or even into negative numbers, the tournament featured the Coachella Valley’s warm climate and beautiful recreational opportunities.

The county also designated Feb. 23 as “Canada Day” at the Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival. About 1,200 Canadians were admitted free after showing evidence of Canadian residency.

More than 300 Canadian companies already are located in California with about 90 in Riverside County. Their work, plus the tourism benefits from Canadians visiting the state, supports 900,000 jobs in California and has a total import/export value of \$35 billion, Fraser said.

“The ultimate measurement is jobs,” Fraser said. “We want to see all those numbers go up.”

Celebrity guests included former National Hockey League star **Luc Robitaille**, who spent nearly 20 years in the NHL with several teams, most notably the Los Angeles Kings, where he is President of Business Operations.



Luc Robitaille

“I’m just out here trying to help out some Canadian boys,” Robitaille said

cheerfully before hitting the links.

World Wrestling Champion wrestler **Bret “The Hitman” Hart** said he was glad to participate because the event was a benefit for March of Dimes Canada, which he said was invaluable in helping him



Bret 'The Hitman' Hart

recover from a stroke he suffered in 2002.

“Ever since my recovery, I have tried to do as much as possible with March of Dimes,” Hart said. “Every day I get up, I show people that you can survive a stroke, and I always remember the people who helped me.”

The tournament was held at the Desert Dunes Golf Club, which was purchased by a Canadian, **Glen Brayshaw**, and his partners two years ago. They invested \$3 million into the property, which was designed by **Robert Trent Jones**, a legend of golf course design. They plan to build homes and condominiums near the course.

“Canadians tend to gravitate to other Canadians when they are abroad,” Brayshaw said. “There are a lot of Canadians who have decided they want to buy here now. It’s a different psychological thing for Canadians. There is a real great vibe.”

Brayshaw and others said the tournament was a great way to showcase the Coachella Valley to Canadian business executives and Canadians who want to be able to play golf for more than just a few months out of the year. The valley already is home to thousands of Canadians who contribute millions of dollars to the Riverside County economy.

“They want to be here,” Fraser said. “There’s no question about that.” ●



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