

Volunteer seniors help push Alberta tourism

By Andy Marshall

(Herald writer)

Alberta's tourism marketing office in Los Angeles has found a novel way of tapping into the well-off southwest United States seniors' tourism market — with virtually no investment required.

The Alberta seniors' host program is benefiting from the volunteer contribution of "snowbird" visitors from Alberta promoting awareness of the province's attractions to other seniors staying in the mobile-

home parks that proliferate in that region of the U.S.

Five couples plus a volunteer co-ordinator reached more than 3,600 potential visitors to Alberta in last year's trial run from November to April. An additional two couples will be added to this year's program.

"We're thrilled with the way the seniors have taken up the challenge," said Gordon Coombs, director of marketing for Alberta Tourism's Los Angeles office and initiator of the project.

Armed with a small budget and "high-quality" promotional material, the pairs make presentations to groups or individuals staying in various seniors' communities "in a very professional manner," said Coombs.

"They're marketing to an international smorgasbord — that's what makes the program so fantastic," said Coombs.

"Seniors are being recognized as a powerful buying market," he added, referring to the estimated 6,500 U.S. citizens who turn 65 every day and

to other statistics suggesting that half the American population will be over 50 by the end of the century.

Coombs said he is confident that audiences are very receptive to the promotional messages being put out by the volunteer teams, although no formal evaluation process is in place.

What's the motivation for the participants? "They've been go-getters all their lives," said Coombs. "They may be older in age, but they want to still use all their talents."