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# Weekend

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## Chamber of Commerce Makes Impact in Jacó

By Gillian Gillers

Tico Times Staff

Founded just nine months ago, the Central Pacific Chamber of Commerce is undertaking a slew of new projects to improve education, security, cleanliness and environmental awareness in the central Pacific canton of Garabito.

The chamber has about 60 members, including real estate agents, developers, law firms, a tattoo company and a surf shop. Its goal is to "create a sense of community here and help protect the interests of tourism and businesses in our region," said chamber co-director Christina Truitt.

"It's important to help the community in which you operate a business," she added.

Most of the chamber's members are concentrated in Jacó, the once-sleepy surfer town that has become a magnet for high-end developers.

"It's like Escazú at the beach," said Truitt, referring to the upscale, condominium-festooned western San José suburb.

The organization has a threefold purpose: improve the quality of life for businesses and their clients; give skills and resources to groups that provide services to the growing tourist population; and make nice with long-time residents who may resent the area's transformation.

It helps that the chamber has both North American and Costa Rican leadership in the form of co-directors Truitt, from the U.S. state of Maryland, and Gabriela Arias, from San José.

"People like to see a Tica and a Gringa involved in this," Arias said.

### Cleaning Up Beaches

A huge, yellow beach-cleaning machine dubbed "the Beach King" is set to make its debut in Jacó any day now as part of a chamber project. A donation from Diamante del Sol condominiums developer DayStar Properties, the machine attaches to a tractor and drags along the beach picking up garbage. The chamber has also acquired a smaller machine that can weave around trees and pick up smaller garbage. A crew of four workers will pick up big debris, such as logs and tires, that the machines can't handle.

"We're psyched about it," Truitt said. "It will make our beach look really manicured and groomed."

If all goes as planned, Jacó will also acquire 50 new ecofriendly garbage stations,



Mónica Quesada | Tico Times

**Chamber Heads:** Gabriela Arias, left, and Christina Truitt, co-directors of the Central Pacific Chamber of Commerce.

a \$40,000 investment by real estate developer Acqua. Each shelter will have four separate bins for plastic, aluminum, glass and trash.

"We're going to use this to kick-start recycling," said David Lekach, manager of Acqua Residences, a luxury apartment complex in Jacó. "It's about making sure that where we are, where we live, where we work, keeps up a certain level of quality."

The chamber of commerce is also involving students in its campaign to keep the beaches clean. In June, it organized beach cleanups at Playa Jacó and neighboring Playa

Hermosa with students from public and private elementary and high schools. The students picked up trash and learned about the environment as they downed snacks and drinks provided by area businesses.

One of the chamber's long-term goals is to win the coveted Blue Flag for Playa Jacó. The exclusive, international eco-label is awarded to beaches with strong environmental management, good water quality and high security, among other features.

### Working with Schools

Improving the Garabito school system is a priority for the chamber, Truitt said. The chamber hopes to place volunteers in each of the district's schools to help teach English, draw up lesson plans and fill other needs.

So far, the chamber has recruited two teachers. Matt Stringer, manager of Tranquilo Punta Leona, teaches English at a small elementary school twice a week for an hour and a half. The school has 15 students in grades one through six, and the only teacher doubles as the principal.

"It's just one guy there, so he can use all the help he can get," Stringer said. "One of our goals is to do positive things and involve the community, and have all the development taking place and the money being made poured back into the community."

In many ways, the chamber of commerce works as a link between businesses that have resources and residents who need them. It organized a fundraiser in January to bring school supplies, backpacks and uniforms to students at the public high school in Jacó. The chamber also posts flyers in a Jacó bookstore inviting tourists to buy lesson plans for students.

"They can write in (the books), 'To Jorge, from Christina in Maryland,'" Truitt said.

### Improving Security

The chamber has also focused on safety and security, a key issue for tourists and businesses. It organized a lifeguard-training program earlier this month for about 15 volunteers, who will ideally work at Playa Jacó after becoming certified.

"We have available now people who are trained and qualified. That's really hard to find, believe me," Truitt said.

In another chamber project, volunteers from the business community teach English twice a week to the Tourist Police in Garabito to help give them the skills to interact with English-speaking tourists. The chamber also lobbies local and national authorities for more training and resources for area police officers.

Garabito Mayor Marvin Elizondo said his municipality is working closely with the chamber in several areas: equipping police, cleaning beaches and repairing roads. Chamber representatives serve on municipal committees addressing security, education, culture and city planning. The co-directors also attend the Garabito Municipal Council meeting every Wednesday.

"They're new ... but they are doing a great job," Elizondo said about the chamber. "They're helping us a lot."

For now, the chamber's strategy is trial and error.

"Because we're in our infancy stages, almost all of our (projects) we're testing," Truitt said. "If it's successful, we go with it, and if it's not, we change to things that are successful." ■



Photo courtesy of Central Pacific Chamber of Commerce

**"The Beach King":** This beach-cleaning machine was donated by developer DayStar Properties as part of a Central Pacific Chamber of Commerce project.

### Contact the Chamber

The Central Pacific Chamber of Commerce is always seeking new members, volunteers and other help. For information, visit its office in Jacó's Pacific Center, in front of CableTica, Monday to Friday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; call 643-2853; or visit [www.cenpac.net](http://www.cenpac.net).

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