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GOV. BOB MILLER sets the speed limit for extraterrestrial travel on Highway 375 during a dedication in Rachel.

Rural highway out of this world

Town of Rachel worries about latest attraction

By Mary Manning
LAS VEGAS SUN

RACHEL - E.T., there's a Nevada highway open and waiting for a visit from you, state officials sang.

But 13-year Rachel resident Shirley Taylor failed to swoon for their siren song Thursday. She sniffed at the hype about the "Extraterrestrial Highway" - a 98 mile two-lane stretch of State Route 375 in central Nevada.



GLENN CAMPBELL, head of the Area 51 Research Center, says Gov. Miller sold out to filmmakers who promoted the upcoming alien invasion film, "Independence Day."



SIGNS at the Little A'Le'Inn Restaurant and Motel give the yield to aliens and flying saucers.

Admitting to seeing four UFOs in Northern California once, Taylor, whose husband works at the Nevada Test Site, said she's never seen any aliens from outer space.

"The only aliens I've ever seen are the people who come to this town," she said.

Business boomed at Rachel's Little A 'Le' Inn, owned by Pat and Joe Travis, as well as booths set up nearby offering out-of-this-world mugs, T-shirts and alien models at the grand opening of Nevada's newest tourism destination.

Taylor worried that with all the publicity hovering over Area 51, the secret base where cutting-edge aircraft are tested, Rachel's small-town atmosphere will evaporate along with the celebrities.

"This town is not a joke," she said.

At least one state agency took that sentiment to heart. The Nevada Department of Transportation was paying Lincoln County's 4H clubs to clean up after the media blitz.

With 120 residents, some Rachel residents felt literally invaded as six bus loads of media, the curious, believers and nonbelievers descended for a party celebrating the 20th Century Fox production of "Independence Day," opening July 3 in theaters across the country.

State officials mingled with Hollywood actors such as Jeff Goldblum, Bill Pullman and Brent Spiner, best known as Data from TV's "Star Trek: The Next Generation." They traveled 150 miles from a Las Vegas-style party at Planet Hollywood on Wednesday night.

Roland and Ute Emmerich, who produced the sci-fi film "Stargate," said they got the idea for galactic attack on 30 major cities around the world from thinking about what would happen if "they" landed. No one had to define "they" on Thursday.

Unveiling road signs bearing "Speed Limit Warp 7," Gov. Bob Miller declared the opening of the first intergalactic attraction in Nevada.

"America, and the rest of the world, has long held a fascination with space," Miller said. The state has touted "the other side of Nevada," meaning wilderness, ghost towns and historical sites, but this is a new market.

"There's one other market left and today we're going to begin getting our message out to that market," Miller said, adding he believed a few highway signs pointing to the wide blue skies might attract someone out there.

Among those in attendance was Lt. Gov. Lonnie Hammargren, who greeted the crowd, "Good afternoon, Earthlings."

The Nevada Commission on Tourism will launch "The ET Experience" on July 1, inviting travelers to explore this lonely road, join the club and see their adventures printed in "Eyes Only," the official Extraterrestrial Highway newsletter, Hammargren said.

Hammargren, a Las Vegas neurosurgeon, chairs the commission. Its toll-free number is (800) NEVADA-8. Callers may request a package complete with map, travel information and membership instructions.

Assemblyman Bob Price, D-Las Vegas, appeared as Darth Vader, although one young lad stopped him and said, with a straight face, "You look like Bob Price." Price had exchanged the alien antenna he wore during the 1995 Legislature.

Rachel resident Glenn Campbell, who wrote "The Area 51 Viewer's Guide," didn't think much of the state inviting unsuspecting tourists to roam near a military installation where guards have detained visitors, confiscated videotape and made arrests.

In a "creative expression of alternative viewpoints," Campbell and some helpers tweaked a sign that sent one bus down a dirt road into the danger zone. No harm done. The vehicle was retrieved and made it to the white tent.

Campbell sent letters to the governor, asking the state to reconsider its plans to bring more traffic to Rachel and other ranches and towns along the route because most people are caught unprepared for the harsh desert conditions.

Calling "Independence Day" a remake of the sci-fi classic "War of the Worlds," Campbell said the newest version portrays killer aliens, instead of emphasizing a more cooperative approach to intergalactic tourists.

Perhaps those traveling the ET Highway will have a kinder, gentler approach. Rachel residents hope so. They are celebrating Rachel Day on Saturday.

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