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Merced is gearing up for Amgen Tour of California bicycle race

By SCOTT JASON

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Like a concert promoter fulfilling a rock star's backstage requests, Merced leaders have their own list of costly must-do's for hosting the Amgen Tour of California bicycle race.

Stage four of the eight-day competition will begin Feb. 18, a Wednesday, in downtown Merced, wind along highways 140 and 59 through the foothills and end several hours later in Clovis.

The city recently approved a contract with the race's organizer. Monday the City Council approved closing some downtown streets for the event, which includes a community ride and a fair.

City staff estimates the event will cost between \$65,000 and \$80,000, not counting time spent planning and running the event.

The city's Amgen committee has been seeking donations and has commitments for between \$50,000 and \$65,000, city Economic Development Manager Frank Quintero said.

Amgen demands that the city avoid sponsorship from certain industries, including energy drink makers, health insurance companies and financial service firms, which he acknowledged precluded the city from tapping some frequent contributors.

Top sponsors include Mercy Medical Center, Merced Mall, Merced Irrigation District and Golden Valley Health Centers.

"They see it as an event for the community, and given the troubled times, they felt this was a good way to invest money to make Merced shine," Quintero said.

Any gaps will be bridged by the city's downtown marketing fund, which, among other advertising, pays for the city's billboards seen across the county. That money comes from extra taxes on downtown shops.

The event is worth the price tag because of the international exposure the city receives and the revenue generated by the spectators expected to visit. Statewide, Amgen boasts that it pumps \$100 million into the economy.

"Merced becomes a destination instead of a go-through city," Quintero said.

The race will be televised on the Versus channel and covered by many media outlets. There are 18 teams with members from 24 countries. About 10,000 people are expected to watch the race in Merced, though that figure could be higher because of the "Lance factor."

Cycling superstar Lance Armstrong emerged from retirement with a racing schedule that includes Amgen and the Tour de France.

The Amgen contract spells out the city's obligations, which include renting 25 single rooms and 38 double rooms for the set-up crew. The hotel must be a three-star or better and be near the starting line.

For the set-up crew, the city must provide 100 breakfast meals, served no later than 6 a.m. It must also give out box lunches with a sandwich, fruit, chips and cookies for about 500. The lunches must include three varieties and a vegetarian option.

There's also an anti-gouging clause, which asks the city to keep businesses from jacking up prices for the event.

So unlike rock concerts, Amgen fans may not have to fork out \$5 for a bottle of water.

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SUNSTAR PHOTO BY GEORGE MACDONALD The Amgen Tour of California has been heavily advertised in Merced. Civic leaders are busy working on ways to pay for hosting the Merced stage of the bike race on Feb. 18.

