Officials: It's been a good year for Oconee County tourism

BY MIKE EADS
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County's tourism business may be off a bit this holiday weekend, but it sounds like the summer was a success overall.

"Overall, it's been a great year ... as far as number of people going up," said Phil Shirley, director of Parks, Recreation and Tourism for Oconee County. "This summer as a whole, we're up a bit this year from last year ... it differs park by park (South Cove, Chau Ram and High Falls), but as a system we're going to experience an increase this year."

Ken Sloan, president and chief executive officer of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), deemed the summer tourism season a success.

"It's been an interesting mix this year," Sloan said. "The state parks did better than last year, hotels bookings were up and boat rentals were up, but whitewater rafting and outdoor adventure were down."

As for the Labor Day weekend, the state facilities are doing better than the county sites.

"Leisure business is up ... (Lake) Jocassee is totally booked, as are the vacation homes and cabins," Sloan said.

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The threat of rain from Hurricane Isaac appears to have softened the end of what has otherwise been a strong year for county-owned campgrounds.

"This is the last big push as far as our county campgrounds go," said Shirley. "Normally, on Labor Day weekend, we would expect the county's campgrounds to be at 80 to 90 percent by Wednesday, but we're only probably at 50 percent as of (Friday) morning. I think the weather forecast earlier in the week created some unease for us. Weather is always a big factor for us."

Shirley said that the efforts of his and Sloan's offices are showing good results.

"The CVB is four years old now," Shirley noted. "We've played with it enough now, and at this point we've seen some things that are working and started to hone in on those things" such as regional marketing, solicitation of group and education tours and the like."

Sloan pointed out that county accommodations tax revenues are growing, which indicates progress.

"ATAX collections are up, so we're doing something right," Sloan said. "Hotel bookings have caught up with campsites."

Shirley noted that some of the county's sites are more than 40 years old. He'd love to augment Oconee's tourism efforts with a competitive fishing site at South Cove, but money is tight and his department's focus will have to remain on keeping up what it already has.

"We understand money is not readily available and we have to plan accordingly," Shirley said, "but at some point we will have to think about retrofitting our park system – the (infrastructure) is 40 years old now and heavily used."

Business will begin to drop in the next few weeks. South Cove will cut its overnight camping price to $12 on Oct. 1, High Falls will close camping at Thanksgiving but remain open for daily use and Chau Ram closes entirely at Thanksgiving until March.

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Joan Ledford, her daughter Amanda Phillips and grandson Blake camp out at South Cove Park. County officials estimate camping space should be available all weekend.

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