Parks' workers stay busy in off-season

BY MIKE EADS
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Late fall to early spring is slow for Oconee County's parks and campgrounds, but there is enough work to keep busy.

"There are general winter projects going on at all three parks such as tree trimming/cutting, painting, facility upgrades, etc.," said Phil Shirley, Oconee County's Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) director.

The double boat ramp at South Cove County Park is a hub of activity, due to upgrades being made by Duke Energy, which owns Lake Keowee.

"The biggest project going on is the access area improvement project going on at South Cove," Shirley said. "This includes a new vault restroom, new ADA parking, new courtesy dock, new picnic pads and seal coating/striping of the parking lot."

South Cove stays open the entire off-season.

"South Cove remains open year round due to its proximity to town, size of campsites and availability to lake front camping," Shirley explained.

South Cove's campsites near Lake Keowee go for $12 per night (regular or waterfront) in the off-season, down from in-season rates of $15 for residents (regular) and $20 (waterfront) and $20 for non-residents (regular) and $25 (waterfront).

"Normally during the winter we experience mostly weekend traffic for camping, especially if it is a mild weekend," Shirley said. "For example, these past few weekends, we have been about 23 percent occupied, which is higher than previous years."

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Many of the visitors are return campers, fishermen, Clemson fans or travelers who use South Cove's campground for a few days before continuing their trip.

"They're people who like to camp without the crowds," said Ranger James Hale. "They tend to be elderly, retired or people who work nearby. We also see our regulars who come every day and walk their dogs, or people who come out to picnic on a pretty day."

High Falls County Park, located northeast of West Union, stays open year round, but its campground is closed until the end of February. It draws a little more than half the campers of South Cove (6,384 and 11,225, respectively last year), but nearly as many visitors on average as South Cove (62,700 and 67,300, respectively).

Chau Ram, near Westminster, is completely shuttered until spring. Despite the limited calendar, it still manages to draw more than 28,000 users annually.

Return business and good word-of-mouth are about the extent of the marketing that PRT and the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (MLCVB) can afford, thanks to tight budgets in recent years.

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Duke Energy and Oconee County's Parks, Recreation and Tourism department are busy with several park projects this off-season, including the addition of a new courtesy dock, restroom and picnic pads for South Cove County Park.

The tight budgets carry over to the parks' staff, too. And Duke adding new facilities will mean more maintenance work when business is slow.

"We could use more help ... Duke building five new sites means there are five new sites to maintain," Hale admitted. "We do the best we can with what we have."

The lull in camping business creates a vital opening for camp staff to do all those things they don't have time for during the summer.

"It gives us a chance to catch up," Hale said. "We try to take our time off in the winter, too."

Shirley and his managers spend nearly all of their time in-season just operating the parks. When business goes slack in late fall, they have time to think about operational changes.

"We are in the process of trying to establish a reservation program for our campgrounds, which will increase traffic," Shirley said. "Currently, we are first-come, first-serve for camping, but data tells us that if we get our systems to a reservation set up, our occupancy numbers will increase. My goal is to have a proposal for the upcoming budget to move into a reservation program."

Both Shirley and Ken Sloan, who runs the MLCVB, are eager to see the results of a study they recently commissioned to improve the marketing of South Cove, High Falls and Chau Ram.

"We are working with Clemson University on a very detailed research project that includes over 800 surveys that were taken between March and November (2012)," Sloan said. "We expect to receive the results of this report by the end of the year and we will use the results to enhance the overall effectiveness of our marketing campaign."

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