Shirley says parks need upgrade

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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SENECA — When South Cove and High Falls county parks first opened in the early 1970s, campsites were most often filled with tents and pop-up campers. Today, $100,000 recreational vehicles filled with amenities not even thought of in the 1970s are pulling into campsites, and the county parks director says it is time for an upgrade.

"The things people were camping with in 1973 and 1974 are totally different than what people use today," said Phil Shirley, director of parks, recreation and tourism for Oconee County. "Our sites weren't built big enough to handle today's camper. We've got to upgrade our campsites."

Upgrading campsites is among the list of items Shirley is proposing to improve the parks and make them more attractive to tourists. About 200,000 visitors come each year to the three county parks at South Cove near Seneca, High Falls near the Keowee community and Chau Ram, near Westminster. The more than 200 campsites have about 12,000-13,000 overnight reservations a year.

"They get a lot of use," Shirley said of the park facilities, many of which are about 40 years old. "Over the years, we're starting to see some deterioration. We need to upgrade to be attractable. We've got a chance, if we do that, to possibly get a couple of these parks up to being sustainable instead of just being a service."

At the campsites, Shirley said some of the sites at South Cove have already been upgraded from 30 to 50 amps, which is the amperage of most motor homes. He said he would like to get all campsites to 50 amps.

"We've upped the amperage for sites here (South Cove) and campers have electrical adaptors, but the problem is they can't use everything in their campers sometimes," Shirley said.



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Park Superintendent Tim Copeland, left, and Park Ranger Luke White repair an electrical box damaged in Monday's thunderstorms at South Cove Park. Upgrading electrical boxes to provide more amperage for recreational vehicles is among the improvements being proposed for Oconee County parks.

Shirley said about 100,000 people visit South Cove every year. The park has 86 camping sites, 44 of which are waterfront. During the summer peak season, the campsites are about 60-80 percent full. The park also hosts several large fishing tournaments each year.

Among the priorities for South Cove are a new maintenance building and a new office. The office was originally a large picnic shelter that was enclosed to provide office space. He said if a new office is built, he would likely move the county park staff to South Cove, making it more centrally located for county residents.

High Falls has more day visitors than campers, which is primarily due to the popularity of the beach there, Shirley said. High Falls has 100 campsites, but only 10 of those are waterfront.

He said they need more office space at High Falls, which would

SEE PARKS, PAGE A5

FROM PAGE A1

be available if county staff moved to South Cove. Other needs at High Falls include picnic shelters, restrooms and replacement of water lines at the campsites. The water lines have already been replaced at South Cove.

Chau Ram, located where the Chauga River and Ramsey Creek meet, has 27 campsites.

"Chau Ram hasn't been used like we envisioned," Shirley said. "That surprises me that it doesn't fill up the way some of our lake properties do. I think the issue is people not knowing about it. We've said it is our best-kept secret. We want to talk about it."

Shirley said his office also needs to make changes to keep up with technological advances to make services more accessible.

"We know our visitors over here in Oconee are looking for rest and relaxation or outdoor adventure and that 60 to 65 percent of those traveling are using either an iPad or iPhone," he said. "We're not set up technologically to be able to do what our visitors want."

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