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The Smith and Talley families enjoy brunch while camping by the lake at South Cove Park. There are ample opportunities in the Upstate for "staycations." Below, the Hardin family, parents Dottie and Dallas, and their children, Tyler, 10, and Nikki, 6, said the vacation trip they'll be able to afford this summer will be a few days in Myrtle Beach.

Many are choosing destinations only a few hours from home

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — The summer of 2010, just as last summer, is expected to see many families choose destinations a few hours from home rather than making those long hauls sure to prompt the inevitable query from kids, "Are we there yet?"

Certainly, there will always be the Clark Griswalds (as in the movie "National Lampoon's Summer Vacation") of this world ready to take advantage of unexpectedly low gasoline prices to venture to faraway places.



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However, that's not for everyone.

In fact, the catch phrase this summer among tourism professionals is "staycation," said Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau Director Ken Sloan.

"All the tourism trend lines point to less travel abroad," Sloan said. "People are traveling four or five hours."

Sloan contends that having gas prices below $2.40 a gallon for regular unleaded only enhances the appeal of staycations.

To take advantage of the staycation trend, Sloan said Mountain Lakes CVB has invested resources in direct marketing by placing visitors guides in areas such as Atlanta, Ga., Savannah, Ga., Myrtle Beach and Charlotte, N.C.

Conversely, Sloan said those destinations are pitching their areas in the Upstate, trying to attract people to their attractions and hotels.

Dottie and Dallas Hardin of Seneca said they want their children, 10-year-old Tyler and Nikki,

SEE STAYCATIONS, PAGE A7

'Staycations'

summer fun on a budget

STAYCATION: Officials trying to lure residents of North Carolina, Georgia to the Upstate

FROM PAGE A1

6, to enjoy their summer vacation.

However, Dottie said she recently left her job at Jantzen when Dallas, a former Seneca firefighter, suffered a mild stroke. She said the family budget cannot afford elaborate vacation plans this year.

"We'll enjoy what we have here," she said.

As they've done in other years, however, the Hardins will not pass up their staycation plans to visit Myrtle Beach, where they'll enjoy the sun and ocean breeze for just three or four days.

Sloan said he is working with local hotels — Best Western, Days Inn, Jameson Inn — as well as rental houses, to come up with weekend "stay and play" packages to boost business by attracting visitors from nearby counties and states.

In the meantime, Oconee's county and state parks continue to be a big summer draw.

Phil Shirley, director of the Oconee County Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, said campsites and RV stations at the local parks were booked for the Memorial Day weekend and the prospects for the Fourth of July weekend appear to be just as promising.

"We are experiencing more out-of-county campers this year," Shirley said.

According to Shirley, about 70 percent of campers at the parks were local people. He said he has also seen more vehicles coming in with tags from Georgia and North Carolina than a year ago.

Sloan said Oconee brings in more Accommodations Tax (ATAX) money from campsites during the summer than from any hotel in the county.

He said a vacation package he'd like to promote is one that teaches families how to camp. He said the package would help families without outdoor experience learn how to put up a tent, start a camp fire, fish, hike and do other outdoor activities in the fall and spring.

"Our goal is to create an awareness of what Oconee has to offer all year-round," Sloan said.

He said the CVB would emphasize building up the down periods during the fall, winter and spring. "Summer takes care of itself," Sloan said.

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