

# Camping, revenue up at Oconee parks

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SENECA — The 2018 fiscal year resulted in gains in both revenue and camping nights for the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department.

“I think the reason that we’re seeing the increase is that the business model has changed where we’re just attracting more people now,” Oconee PRT director Phil Shirley said. “We’re taking reservations now, as opposed to being first come, first served. I think it’s a piece of that, and the one that’s really critical is that we’re creating spaces and recreational outposts that people want to come visit.”

The department’s 2018 fiscal year, running from Oct. 1, 2017, to Sept. 30, 2018, saw 17,360 camping nights and \$568,759 in revenue.

Those numbers equated to 3,707 more nights than were recorded in 2017 and an increase of \$53,439 in revenue. South Cove County Park earned \$344,629 in revenue, while Chau Ram and High Falls brought in \$48,291 and \$175,839, respectively.

“I think it’s important for our goal-setting that we keep parks, recreation and tourism on the forefront so that we continue to upgrade our facilities to be modern and attractive so that you do have a desire from the public to participate and to use those spaces,” Shirley said. “I think that’s part of why South Cove has been successful — because we’ve invested some money here and there’s a desire to come in and enjoy the space. That’s what we’re looking to do across the board.”

Shirley said goals have been set in place for what the department wants to add to its locations.

“We’re approved for two ADA restrooms from county council,” he said. “One is at Chau Ram County Park and the other is at High Falls County Park, and both of them will



FILE

**Ashlie Rochester and her son, Caleb, enjoy some fishing on Labor Day at South Cove County Park in Seneca. South Cove brought in \$344,629 in revenue for the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department in the 2018 fiscal year. The department had a 10 percent increase in revenue compared to 2017.**

be replacing non-ADA restrooms. We hope to make a decision really soon as to whether or not we’re going to build the Chau Ram one in-house or bid it out.”

Shirley said a portion of the work could be done by staff, but time constraints will mean only one project can be started at a time.

“The High Falls restroom, that money that was approved in this budget will roll over and we’ll actually start that one on Labor Day, because I don’t have enough time to get both completed before the season starts,” Shirley said.

In November, efforts began to raise \$765,000 to purchase property adjacent to Chau Ram Park in Westminster that would add 218 acres to the park.

Grants have been marked in an

effort to raise the money before the August 2019 option to purchase expires, Shirley said.

“I don’t have any money on hand to say we’ve made any progress, but we’ve got several grant applications out there and several opportunities that we’ve talked to some folks about,” Shirley said. “We’re looking at a statewide conservation grant, and I’m also going to be making a presentation to our local conservation board in a couple of months about some local money.”

Shirley said the parks department is using all of its resources, including accommodations tax funds, to expand and upgrade the parks for visitors and residents alike to enjoy for years to come.