

OCONEE COUNTY

Parks move into next stage of reopen

SENECA — Oconee County parks returned to regular hours and bumped up capacity Monday as officials continue to monitor coronavirus cases in the area.

On May 15, day use at all county parks opened with limited hours at 50 percent capacity.

Oconee County parks, recreation and tourism director Phil



Shirley

Shirley said Monday's reopening allowed park capacity to be boosted to 75 percent.

"It's been OK. We've turned away a lot of people because we were only open for 50 percent

capacity to try and control social distancing," he said. "We are sanitizing and cleaning multiple times daily — all the touch surfaces. We are excited to increase capacity and trying to get back to somewhat normal to get the folks in who want to visit our location."

In late March, parks were shut down through April due to the spread of COVID-19. As of Monday, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control reported there were 54 cases of coronavirus in Oconee County and another 307 estimated.

No new reservations will be accepted until June 15, and buildings and shelter rentals will remain closed.

On Monday morning, South Cove County Park already had 12 planned camping check-

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ins that were accepted under existing reservations.

"We've had a lot of people that canceled back when this whole thing started," Shirley said. "We just want to make sure we do our due diligence to clean appropriately and we can try to not have a second spike."

Shirley told The Journal the Seneca campground's 86 sites had already been fully booked for the first week after June 15, when new reservations can be made. In the week of May 17-23 alone, Tourism Economics estimated that South Carolina visitor spending was down \$231 million — a drop of 75 percent compared to the same week in 2019. The same outlet said there had been a drop of 53 percent — \$2.6 billion — in tourism spending since the beginning of March in the same



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Reagan Morgan, 15, and Garrett Morgan, 10, get ready to paddleboard at South Cove County Park in Seneca on Monday.

time period in 2019.

"I think it will (bounce back). From a tourism standpoint, we're going to see the drive market, because there's a hesitancy to drive," Shirley said. "We'll slowly begin to market Atlanta, Charlotte and western North Carolina to drive here. I think once we get back open, as long as the num-

ber of cases are controlled, numbers will pick up camping, because you can social distance while camping."

Seneca resident Peggy Petrie was walking in the South Cove parking lot when she told The Journal she's taken advantage of the park being reopened since last month.

"I come every day to walk,

because it's gorgeous — it's a beautiful park," she said. "I'm mixed, a little bit. I think it's nice for people to be able to get over here and camp, and it's a wonderful thing for people and families as long as they're careful. I think that's the issue — just be careful and try not to invade anybody else's feelings in terms of what's going on."

Janal Walton said she was "absolutely" glad the parks were returning back to normal so pickleball leagues could resume play.

"I haven't played pickleball in two months, when I usually play once or twice a week here," Walton said. "We kind of follow the Keowee Key rules, because they finally opened up their courts and it was bleached balls and gloves. ... We're thrilled to be back."