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## TRAVEL: Crowds of RVs take to the road again

As economy struggles, southern Delaware campgrounds enjoy a surge in bookings by those looking for inexpensive vacations

*BY DAN SHORTRIDGE • THE NEWS JOURNAL • JUNE 30, 2009*

Phones were ringing off the hook last week at the Holly Lake Camp Sites near Long Neck.

That's just one small indicator that the state's RV camping market is on the rebound after being hit hard by high gas prices the last few years, which kept many campers off the road.

Southern Delaware's many public and private campgrounds are reporting a strong season, despite the economic downturn.

"The summer's going to look good," said Kenny Hopkins, Holly Lake's manager.

At capacity, some parks, such as Treasure Beach on Little Assawoman Bay, are larger than many small towns, with several thousand people staying there during the height of the summer season. It has a small-town atmosphere, says manager Regina Trollinger: "We watch the kids grow up."

Campers spruce up their RVs -- some of which stay on site year-round -- with fresh coats of paint, landscaping and patio chairs, creating homes away from home. Each park has a different appeal: Treasure Beach emphasizes aquatic activities, while Holly Lake is in a wooded area with hiking trails.

But the community feeling is just one of the draws for RVers who stay for all or part of the season. It's cheaper to stay in a camper than in a hotel or other accommodation, Trollinger said.

"It's their beach house, and less expensive than a condo at the ocean," Trollinger noted.

That sentiment is echoed by Elaine Gallo, manager of the Tall Pines Campground a few minutes west of Lewes.

She said high gas prices the last few years convinced more people to sign up for the full summer season, rather than travel around the country and stay at many different places. All but a handful of her 431 seasonal sites are booked.

"We were a little concerned with the economy, but we've been surprisingly happy that it's really doing well," Gallo said.

Delaware's public campgrounds are reporting similar surges. At the most popular state-run campground, Delaware Seashore State Park, all 45 hookup sites are reserved through Labor Day, said Andy Meanor, state parks operations manager.

"You either have to go all the way into Lewes or all the way out to [Del.] 1 to buy groceries," Meanor said.

That's part of a national trend, with many campgrounds investing in amenities -- stores, water parks, even full-scale restaurants -- to keep vacationers around, according to the National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds.

Sales of campers are also gaining strength, local retailers report.

"This year is 100 percent better than last year," said Butch Wingate, manager of the Delaware

Camping Center in Georgetown. "Last year, there wasn't anybody buying anything, and they weren't fixing up what they had, either, because they just weren't going camping."

That's the case across the country. Next year, RV shipments are projected to increase by nearly a quarter over this year's sales, according to a new forecast presented at a meeting of the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association earlier this month.

But sales of the larger, gas-guzzling motor homes are down considerably, Wingate said. The bright spot comes in smaller, towable campers, around 21 or 22 feet long, he said.

"Your older clientele seems to be going to smaller stuff now," he noted.

Repair and maintenance work is also up this year at the Georgetown business, increasing by 50 percent to 60 percent over 2008, as people want to make their campers last longer, Wingate said.

"People are shopping for more quality now than they used to be," he said. "They want something that's going to last them 10, 15 years."

Hopkins has also seen an increase in the number of people coming for tent camping, opting for a bit more rustic -- and inexpensive -- vacation experience.

"Tent camping is the most economical way," he said.

Visitors at his campground can also stay in log cabins, an increasingly popular idea and a growing trend at campgrounds across the county, he said.

"They don't want to go really hard-nosed camping in a tent, or they don't want to spend the money for a trailer, but they can come in here and rent a cabin," Hopkins said.

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