

Residents turn to camping for more affordable fun

BY MARGO SULLIVAN
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DERRY — Ray Durbin, owner of Mill Brook RV Park in Kingston, has a few weeks left before opening his campground. But based on the number of guests who have locked in their reservations, he anticipates a good summer ahead.

"I'd say it's looking pretty good," Durbin said in a telephone interview from his winter home in Florida.

Most of his customers are renting for the whole summer to stay in one place and save money on gas, he said.

"They want to get away," he said, "but they don't want to go too far."

A similar story is unfolding at other New Hampshire campgrounds, like Hidden Valley RV Park in Derry. Hidden Valley has yet to open for the season, but people have called ahead to lock in their reservations, according to owner Stephanie Simonsen.

Simonsen said Friday that she doesn't have any occupancy numbers yet, but is estimating more people plan to go camping this summer, based on the number of telephone calls she has fielded.

And Bob Nugent, owner of Sunset Park Campground in Hampstead, said the campgrounds close to Massachusetts are always in demand, but this year, the interest has been "more than the usual."

Amy Bassett of New Hampshire Parks and Recreation said so far this year, state campgrounds have accepted 7,114

reservations. That's a slight dip compared to last year when the number was 7,263 at this juncture. Bassett attributed the difference to the cold weather and predicted a warm spell would result in more people planning trips.

Overall, interest in camping is on the rise, and its popularity is at least partly due to high gas prices and the economy, said Gregg Pitman, executive director of the New Hampshire Campground Owners Association.

Pitman, who has been traveling to camping shows in cities

like Providence, R.I., and Hartford, Conn., said he has heard lots of talk from people who have ruled out driving long distances on vacation.

"Camping is an affordable way for people to take a vacation," he said.

Pitman said the association, which includes 134 private campgrounds and 19 state campgrounds, expects people will drive 100 miles to a vacation destination this summer. Many will then save gas money by renting a camping site for the whole summer and staying in the same place.

The other money-saving strategy is to pay the campground to store their trailer for a few weeks, he said. The tourists can then travel to other destinations without having to gas up the recreational vehicle.

A gallon of gas could cost some Americans more than \$4 this spring, according to the price forecast from the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Pitman said he has handed out thousands of New Hampshire travel guides — as many as 5,000 at a single camping show — to people within a 100-mile radius of New Hampshire who are likely to consider New Hampshire attractions, which are relatively close to home.

"People are definitely being more careful with their vacation planning and how they are spending money," said Tai Freligh, communications manager for New Hampshire Travel and Tourism Development.

Although he does not yet have official projections for this summer's visitors, Freligh said summer tourism typically accounts for 40 percent of annual visitor spending, which last year totaled \$4.35 billion.

He anticipates gas prices will keep summer vacationers close to home and fuel interest in free or inexpensive activities, like

hiking, biking, birdwatching and camping. New Hampshire's geography helps tourists get their money's worth, he said.

"On one tank of gas, you can pretty much get anywhere — mountains, lakes and seashore," he said, and people have the option of taking day trips or spending a bit more for overnight accommodations.

Chris Vachon, manager of Eastern Mountain Sports in Salem, said it's too soon yet to say if sales of camping equipment will increase over last year. Vachon said sales typically pick up when school ends.

"But people have definitely started looking at gear and getting outfitted for their summer adventures," he said. "Kayaking has really exploded."

Vachon said kayaking has been the most popular outdoor sport for the past five to 10 years, but lately people have started to use kayaks for fishing.

