

Snowbirds make return flight to Arizona

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Plowing through a slow economy, winter visitors are reportedly taking to highways and roads leading them to the Northwest Valley and warmer climates across the state at a surprising rate this year, RV resort managers and industry trackers said.

"I believe that we're going to have a stellar year with even more people coming in than last year," said J.R. McMillan, manager of Sunflower RV Resort in Surprise. "Even with high fuel prices and the economy, people are still traveling."

McMillan said he's noticed more registrations at the park this year.

The Arizona Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds reported an upturn in reservations and occupancies at many, if not all, of its 80 member sites across the state. However, industry officials said many sites are not members, and the number could be even higher.

Merlin Jones, president of the association, said while there is no state organization to track the comings and goings of winter visitors, RV parks and similar facilities have reported a concerted uptick in the number of reservations made earlier in the season, and the association has projected an industrywide 8 percent increase in winter-visitor traffic over last year.

David Hawley, general manager of Paradise RV Resort in Sun City, said he believes there are more travelers this year versus last.

"I definitely think it's better than last year, and we're seeing better volumes," he said. "It just shows that even though times are tough, people still get out."

Ken Hoffman, a northern Idaho resident, and his wife have been at Paradise RV resort for a month and will leave Friday for Las Vegas.

Hoffman said he wasn't concerned about the economy or gas prices when they took the trip.

"We just saved for it, and as long as we planned for it, we were going to take the trip," he said. "Planning is a key to it all."

Jan Stoecker and her husband, Wes, recently set up on a site at Sunflower RV Resort. They're in town visiting relatives for a couple of days before they go to their winter home in Lake Havasu.

Stoecker said RV traveling is about priorities and believes that's why business is probably steady at some RV resorts.

"You have your priorities on some things, then you figure how to do the rest," she said. "We always seem to find money to do what we want."

Jones, who is also the general manager of Eagle View RV Resort on the Fort McDowell Indian Community, said his RV park is showing early signs of growth over last year's season.

"Things are looking up," he said, noting that the season stretches from October to March, with the main thrust of winter visitors arriving in January. "We've also experienced an increase with regards to reservations and people coming in now." At his park, Jones said, at this time last year he experienced more cancellations. To date, his 150-site park sits right on the higher end, with an 8 percent growth rate over 2008.

While other industries are cutting back because of the economy, many sites that are second homes to winter visitors are doing just the opposite to attract them and their much-needed dollars. Jones said typical improvements he's heard about include landscaping and resurfacing of park roads, construction of new exercise rooms, dog runs, and swimming pool upgrades, which all translate to the early booster shots for the local economy, since local companies and workers make the improvements even before Snowbirds arrive.

The Arizona Office of Tourism reported that last year the travel industry in the state saw \$18.5 billion in tourist spending. Even that lofty number represented more than a 3 percent decrease from 2007, as travel activity began to weaken in the latter part of 2007, along with the collapse of the local and national housing markets and the economic recession that followed, according to the tourism office.

Tourism officials said there was no system in place to track winter visitors specifically, but that the group was included in the larger number of tourists who come and spend their money for one night, a weekend, or for months on end, as in the case of many winter visitors.