

Mackinac Island Businesses Bracing for Projected 3% to 4% Slower Summer Season

Island: From page 9
Mrs. Slevin said between 1990 and 1999, the Island's average number of visitors was 770,000, according to estimates derived from ferry franchise fee figures. From 2000 to 2008, that average dropped 5%, to 740,000.

"We've taken a hit in this last decade from the Wall Street crash in 1999 and the terrorist attacks in 2001, but we aren't down 200,000 people that some believe we are," she noted.

Mackinac State Historic Parks, which operates historic sites on Mackinac Island and in Mackinaw City, is as short-staffed as it can be and is behind in reservations from last year, but is optimistic in drawing more people to its new programs.

Sites such as Colonial Michilimackinac and Mill Creek Discovery Park in Mackinaw City will have new interactive and recreational activities.

This year, an otter slide will be

included in the Discovery Park's Forest Friends area for smaller children, and an interpretive playground will be installed between Colonial Michilimackinac and the Visitors Center near the Mackinac Bridge.

Colonial Michilimackinac will also reintroduce a Native American program, with demonstrations of woodland Indian cultural and crafts, and a shipwreck video will debut at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, said Greg Hokans, MSHP's chief of development and marketing.

"We hoping these new things will attract more visitors," he said.

Mackinac State Historic Parks has 50,000 reservations for all of its sites, which, Mr. Hokans said is "a bit behind last year, but still in striking range."

"There's still quite a bit of uncertainty," he said, "but we feel what we can control on our end is the quality of experience at Mackinac State Historic Parks and make it as enjoyable and accessible as possible. We are encouraged with the

number of bookings we have now. We're still thankful to have numbers in the book in the same range as last year."

One harbinger of a good season is the rise in lake levels, which are higher than in recent years. That's good for the ferry businesses as well as for hydroelectric generation at Sault Ste. Marie, which could mean lower electricity costs.

"It's the highest I've seen it in a while, and the run-off [from Lake Superior] hasn't even come yet," said Mr. Shepler of the lake levels. "That's great news because that means no more dredging."

Average water levels in March in Lake Superior, lakes Michigan and Huron, and Lake St. Clair are all above last year, though slightly below their historical averages, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Technology will also help, noted Mrs. Slevin. Visitors will increase, she said, as more Island hotels provide online reservations.

"A lot of consumers now do their own bookings, whereas before they had to drive to the mall or speak to a travel agent," said Mrs. Slevin. "I think also that businesses are taking advantage of the great resource in consumer feedback that the Internet provides. They can see more quickly a pattern of what consumers want and don't want and adjust that accordingly."



Preparing for the season...With the Straits of Mackinac and the Mackinac Bridge as a background, painters Kirk Smith (left) and Jason St. Onge, standing on a lift 80 feet above the ground, scrape paint near Grand Hotel's cupola on Mackinac Island Tuesday, April 7. Grand Hotel will open for a Rotary conference Friday, April 24. The visitors will get a peek at work needed each spring to open the hotel. Painters will use more than 200 gallons of paint for the hotel's front porch, balconies, ceilings, and flagpoles.

Northern Michigan News Roundup

The news in brief from communities around the U.P. and northern Michigan

Compiled using information published in various community newspapers.

U.P. Regional Jail Concept Would Be Difficult, Study Says

An Upper Peninsula regional jail to save money would be difficult to develop, a study has found. Camp Manistique in Manistique and Mangum Farm in Marquette County were studied as possible sites, but a company called CRS has determined that it wouldn't necessarily offer savings to the counties involved. The company will continue to look into U.P. jail data to see whether such a proposal is feasible.

More feasible options may include smaller partnerships between neighboring counties, which will allow for shared services, the company suggested.

Their report was discussed at the annual Michigan Sheriffs' Association District 1 meeting Tuesday, April 7, in Escanaba. Sheriffs from around the Upper Peninsula attended.

"I think there could be a lot more coordination between counties," said Ron Miller of CRS. "There may be two, three counties working with each other ... one [county] may say, 'you do the infirmary, we'll do the substance abuse.' I think it will be very effective in providing ways to work together to ... get more for their money and improve on the end product."

Counties will learn about these opportunities to work together as the study moves forward, and Mr. Miller said he will set up a second set of one-on-one meetings with each of the U.P. counties. From those meetings he will develop reports identifying types of inmates, trends, operation, staffing, and other items at each of the jails.

— Escanaba Daily Press

City Wants To Turn Inefficient Power Plant Over to Private Company

In a search for a reliable and economical energy supply, Escanaba is seeking companies that would like to operate the city power plant if it's put up for sale. One company has already presented a pitch for buying the facility and converting it to biomass energy at a meeting Wednesday, April 8, and two other companies have been invited to submit proposals.

Officials are considering selling the plant and buy power whole-

sale. The existing plant is 50 years old, inefficient, and fueled by coal which is costly, said city officials.

Biomass fuels would include wood residues such as tree tops and bark, grasses grown locally, building debris, railroad ties, paper mill residue, and fuel derived from tires.

Goals for the company's investment here would be retention of jobs, job creation with biomass crops, agriculture opportunities, temporary construction jobs, and \$25 million in capital spending resulting in increased tax revenues for the city.

Conversion of the facility to biomass would offer private developers tax credit incentives that are not available to the city because it does not pay taxes. A biomass plant must be operational by 2013 to receive the benefits of the tax credits, officials said.

Before officials can sell the plant, residents must give them the authority. Escanaba voters will be asked May 5 to grant the city the authority to sell, lease, or dispose of the power plant, and the League of Women Voters will host a public forum on the issue April 30.

— Escanaba Daily Press

Engadine School Plans Spring Fling

The second annual Engadine Consolidated Schools Spring Fling and Green and Gold Revue will be Saturday, May 9, starting at 3 p.m. at Engadine Schools. The grand finale will be the Green and Gold Revue, a variety show, at 7 p.m.

Sportsmen Will Meet Monday

Straits Area Sportsmen's Club will meet Monday, April 20, at 7:30 p.m. at the Masonic Lodge in St. Ignace. Members are asked to use the back entrance.

Ostomy Group Gathers Sunday

The Straits Area Ostomy Association will meet Sunday, April 19, at 2 p.m. in the cafeteria of Cheboygan Memorial Hospital in Cheboygan.

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