

Summer's end signals slow season

By Cosby Woodruff

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August is summer's lost month for Alabama businesses that count on families with kids spending money on fun.

With most students returning to the classroom before the month is a week old, the dollars stop flowing into camps, amusement parks and other recreational businesses.

Dale Burgener, general manager of Emerald Falls Adventure Park in Prattville, said the start of school means the end of his busy season.

"It definitely hurts," he said. "It is something we notice."

Burgener declined to estimate the dollars involved, but he said the business suffers from a scarcity of both workers and customers.

"Everything drops off," he said. "The weekends remain strong with the warmer weather, but (business) drops off during the week."

Charles Gargus, vice president of development for Southland Entertainment, parent of Alabama Adventures Amusement Park in Shelby County, had a suggestion -- and didn't mind talking money.

He said if Alabama had a unified school-start date that would allow his park to stay open an additional 10 days, it could count on \$1.5 million in additional revenue. Like Burgener, he said his business in August drops off during the week and picks up on the weekends.

Patti Culp, executive director of the Alabama Travel Council, which represents state tourist attractions, hotels and recreational businesses, said her group's members have felt the pinch of an earlier end to summer break for the past 10 to 15 years.

"By the time the third week of July hits, most everyone isn't traveling anymore," she said. "It just hurts these businesses as far as everybody is concerned."

Few business leaders are as outspoken against an early end to summer vacation as Allen McBride, whose family has operated Camp Mac in Talladega National Forest for almost 60 years.

Camp Mac's last campers of the season departed Saturday, marking the earliest closing date for the camp, which opened in 1948.

McBride said camps like his once counted on opening 10 or 11 weeks out of a 12-week summer break. Now he said he is lucky to keep the gates open for eight weeks.

"It is really just June and July that there is not somebody in school," he said.

Culp said the summer wasn't shorter because students are spending more time in school, but more breaks have been put into the school calendar. School systems spread the holidays out, giving students a few extra weeks off in the autumn and in the spring.

"It takes three to four weeks away from summer," she said. "Travel cuts off before July 31."

McBride said the shorter summer has more families planning vacations for the July 4 week. With so many people out of the area, that week is pretty much lost for his business.

"It gets to the point where you can't make ends meet," McBride said.

Not all systems have their non-summer breaks at the same time, he said, so it is almost impossible to plan a fall or spring camp. Also, he said, staffing the camp would be nearly impossible because most of his workers are college students and they have classes of their own to attend during the spring and fall.

McBride, who also is president of the Alabama Association of Camps, said the problem isn't unique to his operation.

Most camps, he said, make the vast majority of their revenues in the summer, and those revenues have to pay a set overhead expense as well as operating expenses.

McBride and Culp both argued for Alabama to look at legislation to require schools not to start before late August, but the legislation has consistently failed.

"We want to be able to do what we do and serve kids."

Burgener said he sees little reason to think that short of legislation the problem will take care of itself.

"It just seems to get earlier every year," he said. "The seventh of August is pretty early to be going back to school."