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Summer tourism in Asheville area rises a bit

By Mark Barrett • September 9, 2010

ASHEVILLE — Parts of the local tourism industry have seen a modest revival this summer despite a lingering sour economy.

The number of people visiting the Asheville Visitors Center in June, July and August was up 12.4 percent over the same period in 2009, and July's figure was the most of any month in the center's history.

People at some tourism-related businesses said sales rebounded sharply this summer while others said they haven't seen much change from a year ago.

"August was probably the best August we've ever had," said Jackie Craig, co-owner of Appalachian Crafts Center on North Spruce Street downtown.

LeeAnn Donnelly, a spokeswoman for the Biltmore Estate, called 2010 a "good summer" but said visitation looks to be flat over the same period from 2009.

Complete figures for hotel and motel use in Buncombe County are not yet available for this summer.

But trends **look good**, said Marla Tambellini, spokeswoman for the Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"I know that not every property is doing really well, but if you look at the overall hotel sales and occupancy, they're up over last year," she said.

It appears that travelers' spending has generally not returned to levels seen in 2007, but the apparent rise in the number of people coming to the area is heartening, Tambellini said.

"It's really hard to pinpoint an exact reason. We're gratified that people are traveling again and hope it continues through the fall," she said.

Possible factors include some improvement in the national economy, changes in **vacation plans**

because of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and publicity from President Obama's visit in April.

Several areas that Asheville competes with for tourists, such as Gatlinburg, Tenn., and Myrtle Beach, S.C., have seen similar increases, Tambellini said.

Results here and the factors behind them vary from business to business. Craig said the opening of Pack Square Park and Pack's Tavern near Appalachian Crafts boosted foot traffic and sales there.

Laura Mahan, co-owner of The Compleat Naturalist in Biltmore Village, said April sales set an all-time record. While final numbers aren't available, August sales were on track to be double those of August 2009.

In light of concern about the economy, "It's actually very surprising. You just don't know what to expect now," said Mahan, whose store sells supplies for enjoying or studying nature and nature-related **gifts**. "Maybe it'll go back down tomorrow, but we like the trend."

Kathy Sklar, co-owner of Albemarle Inn, said this summer has been stronger than a year ago and, "Folks are showing some real interest in October."

The mix of guests has changed, however. Three to five years ago, many guests were in town looking for a second or **retirement** home or came from other

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This summer, Sklar said she saw more international visitors and guests from distant states like Texas and California.

Results are still down in Haywood County, however, said Lynn Collins, executive director of the county's Tourism Development Authority.

The fact that Maggie Valley amusement park Ghost Town did not open because of financial trouble and residual concerns from the rock slide that blocked Interstate 40 in the county for several months hurt visitation, she said.

"We are not recovering as great as we would like," Collins said.

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People at some tourism-related businesses said sales rebound sharply this summer while others said they haven't seen much change from a year ago. (Citizen-Times photo)

INFORMATION, PLEASE

Visitors to the Asheville Visitors Center on Montford Avenue this summer, with the change over the same month in 2009.

- **June:** 21,768, up 10.6 percent.
 - **July:** 25,420, up 10.2 percent.
 - **August:** 23,279, up 16.9 percent.
- SOURCE: Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau

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