

Awaiting the tourists

Monday, Aug. 4, 2008

NEWVILLE — Pontoon boats cruised under the Highway 59 bridge over the Rock River in Newville on Sunday afternoon as live music greeted the boaters and the smell of grilled food wafted in the air.

While it's a typical summer sight for the tourism area, it's been atypical the last two months as floodwaters put a kibosh on visitors and business.

Bar and restaurant owners who depend on those tourism dollars say visitors are starting to return, but there's no way to make up for the sales loss.

"It'll be a tough winter. We do much better in summer, and that helps us get through winter," said John Kinnett, owner of Anchor Inn, a bar, restaurant and boat rental on the river. "It's going to be a long winter. Hopefully next year Mother Nature cooperates."

The rising Rock forced Kinnett to close his business for a month, then left him to repaint his building, lay new sod and fix several piers before opening July 11.

The Buckhorn Supper Club on Lake Koshkonong sat high and dry, but was forced to close for three weeks because the road to it was flooded, owner Chico Pope said.

But this weekend seemed to be a turning point for tourism-dependent businesses, many owners said, as they saw more boats return to the lake.

"This weekend seemed to be our best weekend so far, so that's a good sign," Pope said. "Up through last weekend we were still down 30 to 35 percent each weekend we were open."

Businesses won't see the rate of tourism like last year for another year, said Sue Hagan, who owns Fins Bar & Grill with her husband, Pat.

"The big attraction here was being on the lake, and they couldn't get on the lake," she said.

When word spread of flooding in the Lake Koshkonong area, businesses not on the lake took a hit, too.

Steve Cline, majority owner of Jellystone Park of Fort Atkinson, said his campground reservations are down about 25 percent from a normal summer. He's still getting calls asking if the area is flooded.

"In actuality, the majority of us never were flooded ... I think the news blew it up to the point where people thought it was a lot worse," he said.

Cline and other owners point out, though, that high gas prices and tightening of pocketbooks also have contributed to the fall in their tourism business.

With piers and cottages needing repairs and only four weeks until Labor Day, Pope predicts traffic probably still won't pick up to a normal August pace.

"I think you're going to see lighter traffic this whole rest of summer," he said.

While owners said local patrons have provided great support, it's that extra tourism push they need.

"We'll survive the summer just fine," Pope said. "I'm afraid for most of these businesses to get through the winter."

That's why many are adding events to draw more people to the lake area.

Fins is planning a shoreline recovery and restoration fund-raiser on Saturday, Aug. 16, to benefit the lake residents.

"We just really wanted to be part of the solution and try to get people back on their feet," Hagan said.

That should draw people to the area, said Kinnett, who's seen his sales at Anchor Inn drop about 50 percent since he reopened. Now he's planning things such as a pig roast and a free corn boil for this weekend with other events he normally wouldn't have in coming weekends: a Mardi Gras party, hosting the Pink Houses band and having midget wrestling.

"We said, 'instead of just sitting back, let's do some promotional stuff and have some fun—give them a reason to come out,'" he said.

IF YOU GO

What: A benefit to raise money for the shoreline recovery and restoration fund.

When: 10 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 16.

Where: Fins Bar & Grill on the Rock River in Newville.

Details: The event will include raffles, door prizes, silent auction, live music all day and food and drink specials.

Area businesses set up a committee and a fund to help with cleanup efforts from Indianford to Fort Atkinson on the Rock River, as well as property on Lake Koshkonong. Assistance including removal and disposal of sandbags and building materials will be provided to neighborhoods within the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District.

A committee of volunteers will allocate funds to contractors, landfills and waste companies who conduct cleanup efforts and collect waste material. No proceeds will be allocated directly to individual homeowners. The fund is a component of Community Foundation of Southern Wisconsin.

The shoreline recovery and restoration fund help line is 1-888-905-1116.



Photo by [Al Hoch](#)

Dave Turner of the Blue Olives entertains a crowd at Fins Bar & Grill on Ellendale Road in Newville. Recent flooding has dampened business, and establishments that depend on tourism say there's no way to make up for the sales loss.



Photo by [Al Hoch](#)

The Anchor Inn in Newville is open and customers are returning after the Rock River flooding shut down the business.



Photo by [Al Hoch](#)

The water level on the Rock River near the Highway 59 bridge in Newville has dropped enough so that boaters are able to return to the water. As more people take to the river, business will improve at area bars and restaurants.