

Tourism: Wish you were here

By Tony Dobrowolski
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — Last year, the economy kept more travelers close to home, and rain put a pox on the summer weather. All in all, conditions for Berkshire County's travel and tourism industry were not the best in 2009.

But not every cultural organization suffered. Some reported losses; others, gains. Many Berkshire lodging establishments experienced a decrease in occupancy rates, but the proprietor of four establishments said advance bookings already are way ahead of last year.

With summer only a few months away, Berkshire Visitors Bureau President and CEO Lori Klefos said she's cautiously optimistic that the county's travel and tourism industry — which has a \$534 million annual impact on the local economy and generates \$25.4 million in state and local tax revenue — will fare better in 2010.

"The information we have is that travel is going to increase," she said. "Americans view vacations as a birthright."

More people are expected to drive than fly this year, according to Klefos, which should help the Berkshires, because about 25 million people live within a four-hour drive of the county. An average of 2.5 million visit the Berkshires annually, with the bulk of those visitors coming between June and October, according to the Berkshire Visitors Bureau.

But the people who do visit the area, known as one of America's premier cultural destinations, aren't staying as long they used to. Klefos said visitors began taking shorter vacations last year, turning what used to be weeklong visits into weekend stays.

"It was a trend that we saw last summer, and I expect it to continue," she said.

Smith Travel Research, which tracks 24 of the county's largest lodging establishments, including the Cranwell Resort and Spa, the Red Lion Inn and the Crowne Plaza Hotel, found that room occupancy declined to 57 percent last July, a drop of seven percentage points from the same month in 2008.

Economic recovery slow in the Berkshires, but encouraging signs abound

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arrive in the county by the summer.

Local business leaders believe the county's economy is improving, but cite the lack of job opportunities as reasons why the Berkshires are still in a recession.

"I think things may be brightening and picking up a bit," said David M.

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Lori Klefos, Berkshire Visitors Bureau president and CEO

Last summer's soggy weather contributed to the decline in the occupancy rate. After 6.6 inches of rain fell in the Berkshires in June, 11.7 inches followed in July. That made July 2009 the wettest month in the Berkshires since 1982, and the fifth-wettest since record-keeping began in 1939.

"All the years that I've been here, the weather is the biggest unknown," Klefos said. "Last year we had a lot of rainy days during the summer. Hopefully, this year, Mother Nature cooperates."

Things picked up a bit in August, as special events such as James

With the effects of the economic recession still apparent, Klefos said consumers aren't spending as much as they normally do. To attract travelers under these types of conditions, Klefos said the value that the Berkshire entities offer is more



Photos by Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Above, a woman checks a map to plan another Berkshires stop while dining at Hancock Shaker Village. At left, Joe Dunn of Pensacola, Fla., sleeps on the porch of the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge.

Taylor's weeklong residency at Tanglewood at the end of the month helped pushed the occupancy rate to 65 percent. But that figure still was lower than the 69 percent rate of August 2008.

crucial than before.

"Value doesn't mean less expensive," she said. "It's offering something different. At some inns you can stay through the weekend and get one night free."

Value at the Red Lion Inn means continuing to offer visitors the same amenities they've always received, such as flowers in guest rooms and piano music during dinner. The decline in the Red Lion's occupancy rate wasn't as steep as it was at other establishments, according to Bruce Finn, the inn's general manager.

"We have a full-time florist, and some people think that when you cut costs, that's one of the first things to go," Finn said. "But we found that people really like those things."

Joe Toole, who owns four Berkshire County lodging establishments, including The Yankee Inn in Lenox, offered discounted lift tickets to area ski resorts as part of his room rates this past winter, and his occupancy rate went up by 45 percent in January and February, he said.

Toole said advance bookings at his lodgings are about three times stronger than they were last year.

"We can't take any more groups for a number of weekends this year," he said.

Finn said advance bookings are up slightly at the Red Lion. They have increased significantly for Independence Day weekend, when James Taylor will appear for three nights at Tanglewood.

Several culture venues plan to maintain joint admission packages this year, Klefos said. They include the "American Icons" package involving Hancock Shaker Village, the Norman Rockwell Museum, Chesterwood and The Mount.

The Barrington Stage Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Berkshire Theatre Festival and Shakespeare & Company plan to continue a program that allowed those who bought a ticket at one theater to receive \$10 off the admission price at the other three venues.

"One of the things that we're finding since the economic downturn is more ways to work better with other nonprofits," said Barrington Stage Artistic Director Julianne Boyd. "We should have been doing it all along."

Rooney, president of the Berkshire Economic Development Corp., which facilitates, coordinates and leads collaborative economic development efforts in the region. "But I think we're still in a recession because an awful lot of people are looking for work.

"Until they can find meaningful work, it's a challenge," Rooney said.

"We're certainly at the early stages of recovery. ... We may be seeing some signs of recovery in the stock market. But on the basic bellwether of 'How do you feel about your job security?' — I think people are still struggling through some challenging times."

Heather P. Boulger, executive director of the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board, said

there normally is a spike in the county's unemployment rate in January as the ending of seasonal employment coincides with the first quarter of the financial year. The state does adjust local employment rates for seasonality after they are released, but Boulger said the numbers rarely drop more than a percentage point.

She said the long economic down-

turn has made employers in the Berkshires wary of bringing on new workers right now.

"It's going to take a while for the employers to have the confidence that they need to start hiring the people they would like to continue to grow their businesses," she said. "How long that time frame is, I don't know."