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Estes Park economy slower than normal this summer

■ Good news could be on the horizon after an increase in requests for area vacation guides

By JAY GENTILE

In his 28 years of living in Estes Park, never has Town of Estes Park Advertising Director Peter Marsh seen anything like this summer. It's the slowest one he's ever seen.

"We're fighting a real tough economy," he said. "For a lot of retailers, it's pretty difficult out there this year. It's a very up and down pattern."



Photo by Walt Hester

Traffic is off this summer in Estes Park, despite what motorists encountered Monday on Elkhorn Ave.

Some days this peak season downtown Estes Park was packed, but other summer days could easily be mistaken for fall

or winter if it weren't for those calendars reminding everyone it's still prime tourist time.

"By the time you get to the last week of June, every day should look the same in terms of traffic," he said. "A Saturday should look no different than a Tuesday. That's not the case this year. Our hope is that the market changes dramatically after Labor Day."

He said this slowdown has spread to all tourist communities this year, not just Estes Park. He said news earlier in the year about rising gas prices and consistent reports of corporate layoffs have hurt tourism, but the continued national economic slump has inflicted the most pain.

"If it's a problem with economy, a little more advertising is appropriate," he said, "but there's a point where you're just spending more money."

Last month, the Town announced it would spend the most it ever has on summer ads in an expanded advertising effort to combat market uncertainty. The plan included adding magazine ads, incorporating a new Internet banner ad, and taking the unusual step of advertising on television in the summer.

Marsh said it is too soon to tell whether those efforts have paid off. "If we come out of summer not as damaged as we thought we'd be, then we've probably won," he said.

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RMNP wilderness designation in doubt

By JAY GENTILE

August will prove to be a crucial month in the current drive to designate 95 percent of Rocky Mountain National Park as wilderness, said wilderness designation supporter and Rocky Mountain Nature Association director Curt Buchholtz.

The current drive for wilderness designation, sparked by U.S. Representative Mark Udall's introduction of a RMNP wilderness designation bill in the House of Representatives this April, has lost steam since supporters failed to gain support from the Estes Park Town Board after presenting the issue to trustees at their May 22 meeting.

At that meeting, trustee Jeff Barker said designation would put the local economy in jeopardy, Mayor John Baudek expressed concerns about not being able to add ranger stations or extend roads in areas that experience new popularity in the future, and trustee David Habecker asked for more documentation on claims that designation wouldn't hurt Park visitation or the economy.

While the Town Board has taken no formal stance

on the issue, the Estes Park Chamber Resort Association has come out in opposition to designation — saying that too much of the Park is being proposed as wilderness.

Since then, supporters of designation have received the support of the Town of Grand Lake and the Grand County Commissioners. Buchholtz also recently made a presentation before the Larimer County Board of Commissioners, who took no formal stance on the issue.

"We support the concept of wilderness," said Town of Grand Lake Manager Jim Cervenka. "Grand Lake is one of a few communities in Colorado where you can drive a snowmobile on the street. To get to Forest Service (snowmobile) trails, you have to cross a southwest corridor of Rocky Mountain National Park. We don't want to lose that."

Cervenka said that one positive of wilderness designation is that fact that the Park would be removed as a wilderness study area. It has been a study area and has been managed as if it were wilderness since 1974, but has never been formally designated as

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Photo by Martin B. Hamilton

The Olympic Spirit burns in Eagle Rock

Members of the Eagle Rock School Olympic Committee present the colors of the games Friday on the ERS athletic field. From left to right are flags for Eagle Rock School, the United States and Greece, the latter the home of the Olympics. Committee members also wore Greek togas and laurel wreaths in the spirit of the Games.

New Storm Pass Trail opening date projected for the end of Sept.

By JAY GENTILE

Two months from now, Rocky Mountain National Park plans on unveiling a new three-mile trail for members of the hiking public.

The long-anticipated New Storm Pass Trail is scheduled to be finished and opened by September 30. In the meantime, a nine-member trail crew is putting the finishing touches on the three-year trail construction project.

For now, the trailhead will be placed at the old barrow pit just south of the small parking lot at Lily Lake. From there, the trail will cross the Aspenbrook Trail and ultimately connect with the Old Storm Pass Trail approximately a quarter-mile south of Estes Cone.

From there, hikers can either make the short climb east to Estes Cone, head south to Eugenia Mine and the Longs Peak area or make their way northwest to connect with the trails extending from Bear Lake Road.

The new trail is part of Rocky Mountain National Park's recent efforts to consolidate area trailheads

“In the Lily Lake area, we will be doing much more detailed planning in the future to look at parking and road access.”

— Larry Gamble

that are dispersed throughout private properties around U.S. Highway 7 and place them within public lands.

A development concept plan regarding the Lily Lake, Longs Peak and Wild Basin areas along U.S. Highway 7, which included an environmental assessment, was reviewed and commented on by the public in the mid 1990s. "That guides planning in those areas," said Land Use Specialist Larry Gamble.

In 1998, the Park laid out the New Storm Pass Trail and moved the Twin Sisters Trail a half-mile north so it was no longer on private land. This was a year after the short handicapped-accessible Lily Lake trail and higher-elevation Lily Ridge trails

were constructed.

The Park hopes that the New Storm Pass Trail will relieve pressure from the current Old Storm Pass trailhead, which extends from private property near the Salvation Army off U.S. Highway 7.

"In the Lily Lake area, we will be doing much more detailed planning in the future to look at parking and road access," said Gamble. "Again, the public will be involved. It will be a more detailed look at the area with alternatives."

One of those preliminary alternatives includes keeping the lot by the Lily Lake Visitor Center open as parking for Twin Sisters and making a new lot at the barrow pit across the street as parking for the Lily Lake, Aspenbrook and

New Storm Pass trails.

As part of that option, the current lot next to Lily Lake could be left as is or restricted as a drop off point for boats and canoes. Gamble said more detailed options regarding parking in the area will be released for public review in about a year.

Working on the trail

With a significant amount of work from several volunteer groups like the Shining Mountains Group of the Colorado Mountain Club and Larimer County Youth Conservation Corps, a nine-member Park trail crew has been steadily blazing the new pathway over the past three years.

"These are pretty popular trails," said Trails Supervisor Dave Larsen. "We're trying to build them to a pretty high standard to withstand the anticipated high use. It makes it so Lily Lake has a nice little selection of trails that people can hike out of and tie in with other trails."

The trail, which will likely be rated as moderate by most hiking guides,

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Photo by Jay Gentile

Ken Rybkiewicz (standing) looks on as Park employees Dave Sheldon and Chris Treadway work on a technical section of the New Storm Pass Trail, which is scheduled for completion by September 30.

Storm: New trail is designed to contour of the rugged Rocky Mountain terrain

Continued from page 1

starts at 8,800 feet and tops out when reaching Storm Pass at 10,300 feet.

The trail crew is currently working to connect the last half-mile of new trail with the Old Storm Pass Trail. It is also employing its more experienced workers to finish off more technical sections throughout the trail.

"It's designed to contour the land with a 10 to 15 percent uphill grade," said trail crew chief Ken Rybkiewicz. "When we exceed that grade, that's when we need to build stairs."

The crew has worked to construct several rock staircases, mostly in the early sections of the trail. It has also built two small bridges within the trail's first half-mile, which Rybkiewicz said is home to bears, coyote and grouse in the spring.

In addition, a separate five-member crew has recently completed a 45-foot bridge where the Aspenbrook and New Storm Pass Trails converge. This will allow for safer passage of horses and hikers at the trail confluence.

"It's a rare thing to build a new trail," said Rybkiewicz. "We

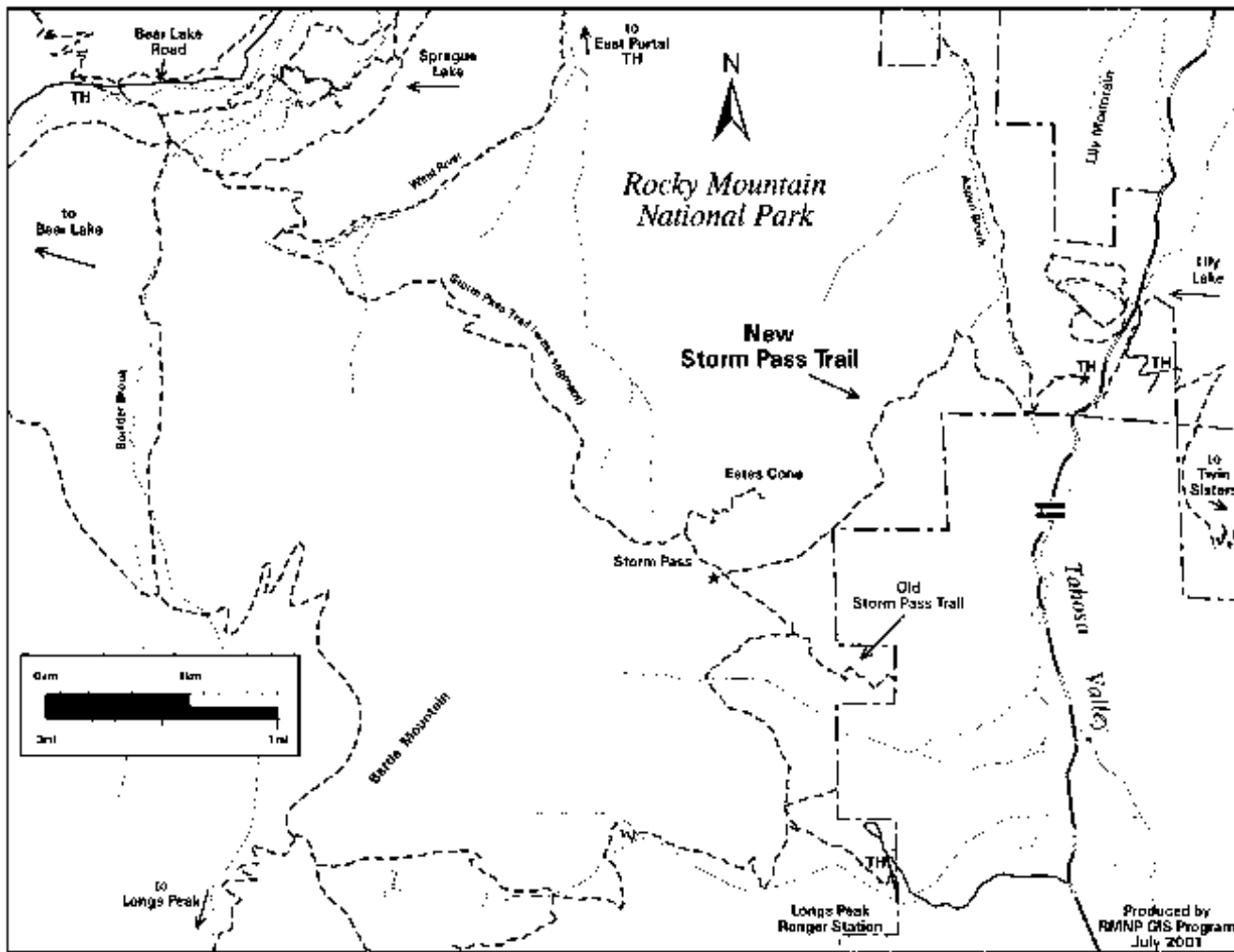
usually formalize the traditional (animal or Native American) routes. We usually do more reconstruction than construction."

Part of that trail construction involved eight hours worth of work in order to move a dangerous 37,000 pound rock off a ridge to use as part of the 36-inch wide trail.

"Part of it was to get it out of the way," Rybkiewicz said of the rationale behind the massive rock move. "We were able to use it and get it in position. Otherwise, we would quarry it and break it up to be distributed on the trail."

Rybkiewicz said logs along the trail typically last about eight years while the rocks can last up to 100 years. "The trail will be here when our great-grandkids are visiting the Park," he said.

The trail's total cost is \$390,000, said Assistant Superintendent Tony Schetzle — \$80,000 of which was private money donated by the Rocky Mountain National Park Associates. The rest came from various National Park Service appropriations and fee-demonstration money.



The new Storm Pass Trail will intersect with many old-established trails in the Long's Peak area of the Rocky Mountain National Park.

Peak: Fall indicators show promise

Continued from page 1

Yet for the second month in row, good news came in the form of increased requests for Estes Park vacation planners from the public. As of June 30, requests for the tourism information packets are up 6.15 percent over last year.

"It's a good indication to me that we could have a good fall," Marsh said at last Thursday's Community Development Committee meeting. "It's a good indication we could have a nice 2001. Something good is going to happen for Estes Park sometime."

In addition, requests for planners that came directly from Town advertising as of June 30 is up 17 percent over last year. This is good news, Marsh said, because the Town doesn't have to spend as much on advertising when more people per ad respond.

At the meeting, Marsh also announced the conclusion of this year's experimentation with advertising on the Internet.

The Advertising Department started with a test ad on the Google search engine, moved into testing advertising on sites that target specific audiences like bhg.com and Away.com, and finished up with a test banner ad on the Internet network Engage Media in July.

The results were all basically the same: "It's too

expensive for us," Marsh said of Internet advertising.

What he means is that the cost per response, the ratio of what the Town spends per person who asks for more information and gives the Town their name, is \$36 per response with the random, non-targeted Engage Media network. The targeted sites worked a little better but still cost in the \$20 to \$35 range per inquiry.

By comparison, the cost per inquiry on magazines is typically around \$4. "We have better ways of reaching people than the Internet," Marsh said. "There's too much out there, people hitting you from all over," said Trustee David Habecker.

Therefore the Town is abandoning its Internet advertising efforts for now. "Something will have to change for us to go back and try this again," Marsh said. "We won't start up again until we are given some indication that it would be worth it."

With the money saved from the withdrawal of Internet ads, the Town plans on adding an additional month for advertising in magazines. The Town traditionally advertises in March to drive summer tourism and in September to drive the fall and for those who plan far in advance for next summer.

Yet in the past few years, the Town has taken notice

of a segment of the population that make last minute travel plans. "We want to grab them without throwing away the people who plan earlier," Marsh said.

As a result, the Town will also advertise in April or May next year in addition to March and September in an effort to snag late-planning tourists.

In the meantime, the Town's expanded summer advertising effort will continue to run its course. On Channels 4 and 7, the Town is advertising on premium shows like Martha Stewart, the Late Show, Good Morning America, Oprah Winfrey, Wheel of Fortune and Nightline.

These shows were not picked because Marsh likes to watch them. A television rating service that the Town subscribes to called Scarborough surveys viewers and asks if they visit Estes Park. These shows have the highest percentages of people who reply yes.

The commercials began July 12 and will run until September 28. After that, the Town's fourth quarter ad campaign will begin.

"My hope is that people's general tension about the economy is relaxing a little bit and that they are planning vacations after all," said Marsh. "Maybe we'll see it this fall. Maybe we won't see it until next year."

Wilderness: Project is currently lacking support from Estes Park Town Board

Continued from page 1

wilderness by Congress.

If the Park is designated as wilderness, formal boundaries of what is and what is not wilderness would be established — clearing up some murky issues of where people can and can't use bikes or snowmobiles around Grand Lake.

"A study area is almost more restrictive," said Cervenka. Designation "it would open up some areas of discussion."

For example, the Town of Grand Lake would like to explore the possibility of establishing bike trails between Grand Lake and Forest Service land to the immediate south. Those discussions are currently not allowed to take place since the area is a wilderness study area, Cervenka said.

The Town of Grand Lake, in a June 5 letter of endorsement sent to Senator Wayne Allard, said it wants to make sure it is included in discussions of where the boundary lines are drawn — to

ensure that the snowmobile and possibly the bike access areas are excluded from designation.

"That's not a wilderness area anyway," said Buchholtz of the snowmobile access corridor.

Other non-wilderness areas of the Park would be the areas around cities like Grand Lake and Estes Park, the Bear Lake corridor, Moraine and Horseshoe Park, the Twin Owls area and Trail Ridge Road.

Future man-made development would be allowed in these areas, but not allowed in areas that are designated as wilderness. Trails could be constructed and worked on in wilderness areas.

"It's being managed as wilderness right now," said Grand County Board of Commissioners Chair Duane Dailey. "We think that's in line with the way it should be done. It seems to be a good management plan, for the west side anyway."

Dailey and his May 30 endorsement letter to Allard

"We've decided to give it a lot more time in order to better educate people

restated the Board's desire to retain that snowmobile access corridor as a non-wilderness area.

Next steps

Buchholtz said designation supporters, which include the League of Women Voters and Estes Valley Improvement Association, may approach the Town Board again in mid-August or September.

Allard has stated that he will introduce a bill in the Senate similar to Udall's House bill asking for RMNP wilderness designation — but only if he is con-

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— Curt Buchholtz

vinced there is adequate public support for designation.

Buchholtz said "we probably will not go forward" without gaining the crucial Town Board support. "We wouldn't support (designation) if we thought it'd be injurious to the local economy."

He has encouraged supporters to write letters to Allard showing their support. So far, 50 letters of support and one letter of opposition have been sent to Allard.

Supporters hoped to have the level of support it needed by June 1, but getting that support has proven more difficult than

originally conceived.

"We've decided to give it a lot more time in order to better educate people," said Buchholtz. "There's plenty of time to enter new bills into legislation."

He urged supporters to write letters to Town trustees to show their support, which will hopefully lead them to support designation early this fall.

If that happens, Buchholtz hopes to get a bill introduced by mid-September or mid-October. He said the political climate is right at this time, so the legislation would likely pass the House and Senate and be signed by President Bush.

But first, supporters need a stronger public endorsement.

"We may go into a more active role of generating town support," Buchholtz said. He said materials will be passed out to the 200-300 members of the Rocky Mountain Nature association at its annual picnic August 4 in an effort to generate more support.

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