

Bookings, reservations indicate strong summer ahead for Spa City

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SARATOGA SPRINGS - Recession be damned, the summer of 2009 is shaping up just fine, say local tourism experts.

"I don't see Saratoga being as affected as other places in the country," said Tom Federlin, who rents about 150 different homes in and around Saratoga Springs to visiting tourists during the summer season.

After eight years in the business, his list of clients extends to 22 states and includes travelers who come to Saratoga from as far away as the state of Washington to rent local residents' homes for prices ranging from \$1,500 to \$12,000 per week.

"People are still coming to town for the ballet. They are still coming to town for the horse show," said Federlin, the principal broker at Racing City Realty. "My business is up significantly from last year at this time -- and last year was my best year."

Renting homes brings visitors into town and puts extra income into the pockets of local property owners, who can use that money for everything from college tuition to home improvements.

While rental costs have stayed about the same for the past few years, Federlin said this year, renters are trying to negotiate better prices.

Lori Leman, owner of Saratoga Realty Associates, said she has also noticed that people are looking for price breaks.

"I think people who are calling up to rent a home are looking for bargains. They are interested in negotiating on price more so than in other years, but the thing is they still want to come to Saratoga," she said.

Leman had her busiest year ever in 2008, with about 160 leases. This year, she is listing 200 homes available for the summer.

It is still too early to predict how the summer will pan out, she said, but business has been good to this point.

"Saratoga always seems to weather the downturns and recessions better than other areas of the country, and we're hoping that people are still looking to Saratoga as a place they want to come in the summer," she said.

In the local convention industry, City Center Authority President Mark Baker said bookings are solid.

"In 2008, we ended up with 122 events and the building was in use 230 days. Right now, we already have 104 events booked for 2009 and another 81 booked for 2010. It's a strong indicator that the conference business is solid and holding," Baker said.

Baker said he is monitoring whether the recession is causing a slip in the number of participants in -- or the length of -- particular conferences.

Business is up at "extended stay" hotels like the Residence Inn by Marriott on Excelsior Avenue, where Leslie Miller is director of sales.

"At the moment, I'm probably doing better than I've ever been for the summer," Miller said.

The recession could be boosting the local economy by inspiring residents to stay put and put their vacation money into their own homes.

"We live in a great part of the country where people can enjoy the whole summer rather than just one week," said Andy Heck, general manager of Alpin Haus.



Alpin Haus held its first-ever combined boat, pool and spa expo earlier this month at the Saratoga Springs City Center, and Heck said he saw many local families researching swimming pools.

"When you take the family (away) on vacation, all that you're left with afterward are the bills," Heck said. "What we're selling is a vacation option."

Heck said, even though consumers are more guarded with their budgets, they are willing to make careful investments.

"In the past, there was a buying frenzy. It was more spontaneous. Now, more customers are doing research and trying to make the right decision," he said.

"We're still building momentum. Last year, in the middle of the summer when gas prices reached their peak, then with the elections, (consumers) were paralyzed. It seems now there's a return to normalcy."

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