

HIGHLAND PINES CAMPGROUND

Private campgrounds offer big economic boost to community

BY OLIVIA RUTT



DON, NOLAN AND JESSE VALLERY,
HIGHLAND PINES CAMPGROUND

WELLINGTON COUNTY - During the weekends, people flock north to their cottage, trailer or campground to get away from the hustle of the daily grind. This great migration is not only beneficial to campgrounds such as Highland Pines Campground near Belwood and Pike Lake Golf Centre and Campground near Mount Forest, but is seen as positive economic impact to the surrounding businesses.

HIGHLAND PINES

The Highlands Pines Campground, located on Wellington Road 19 near Belwood, is celebrating 50 years of business in 2017. What started out as a Christmas tree farm was transformed into a large campground that accommodates 2,500 to 3,000 on any given weekend during the summer months.

Hugh Vallery and son Don made the decision to cut campsites into the rows of trees in 1967, opening up their acreage that backs onto the shores of Belwood Lake. In 1987, Don bought the acreage across the road, expanding the campground to phase two. Nearly 25 years later, the business, which now includes Don's two sons Nolan and Jesse, expanded further into phase three, Valley Springs.

The site now encompasses 270 acres of land, both recreational and wilderness areas.

"The business was growing; we saw an opportunity to have more families enjoying their summer here and figured it would be a

good business opportunity as well," said Nolan Vallery, general manager of the park.

There are 734 sites with 614 seasonal and 120 overnight spots, and most weekends book fast.

Nolan said having the overnight sites are important to the business' growth, as it allows people to visit and try out the campground before committing to a seasonal site.

During the five months the campground is open, visitors can take part in numerous activities held at "the arc" or "the hut" recreation buildings. There are also three pools, two splash pads, various playgrounds including an 80-foot pirate ship, a beach and a 100-slip marina.

In order to run such a large campground, there needs to be staff. Nolan said there are 12 full-time staff members that work at both Highland Pines and at Pine Meadows, a retirement community down the road. That number increases to 50 during the busy summer months. Nolan said he sees the value of hiring local for internal jobs as well as contract work.

Centre Wellington Township also sees the impact the campground has on the surrounding area, said Nolan.

"They really understand our contribution to the area and what not; the jobs that we provide and the people who come here and then go out to the shops in town and they go eat out, so they really recognize the impact the

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HIGHLAND PINES CAMPGROUND

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business has to the region and they've worked really well with us in the past," he said.

Some of those who come to the campground for a weekend away end up investing in the local communities by buying property, said Nolan.

Those that do not go the permanent route still experience Centre Wellington.

"For the larger community, our biggest impact would be the people who come here and venture into town," said Nolan.

"It's nice to see those people out, going out for dinner, having a little entertainment here or there, or even just going into the shops and spending a little money. It's nice to see them

PHOTOS: OLIVIA RUTT



contributing that way.”

It's actions like these that has Don estimating the economic investment to the surrounding area as approximately \$5,000 to \$7,000 per camp site.

PIKE LAKE

The sprawling 600-acre Pike Lake Golf Centre and Campground also generates a huge boost to the local economy during their summer months.

When Irv and Joan Cowen purchased the property on Highway 89 between Harriston and Mount Forest in 1961, it already had a motel and a nine-hole golf course.

Irv passed away in 2010 and Joan is still owner of the business.

Their eldest son Herb, now part owner of the property with his siblings Jeanne and Tom, explained it was hard at first for his parents to make ends meet. It wasn't until 10 years later, when John Thompson approached the couple to run a hockey camp from the lake, that the idea of a trailer business and campground opened up new possibilities.

Now the property, which surrounds Pike Lake, the largest of six kettle lakes in the area, accommodates about 3,000 people per weekend through a motel, cabins and seasonal trailers along with overnight camping. There are 400 seasonal and overnight sites and 140 year-round sites.

The golf course also expanded twice, adding an additional nine holes in 1986 and again in 2001.

Pike Lake's economic impact starts with its

employees.

Herb said about 140 employees, both full time and part time, help keep the campground and golf course running.

Many of the employees who started out as students (including those at Norwell District

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and Wellington Heights secondary schools in Palmerston and Mount Forest respectively) working during the summer have gone on to find success in other roles.

“I call it the Pike Lake system,” Joan said.

While Pike Lake can seem self-sufficient, Herb says it relies heavily on local businesses. Whether it's for building supplies, groceries or a night out, the people who call Pike Lake

home during the summer are contributing to the Harriston and Mount Forest economies.

While there is no quantifiable data, Herb said, based on what he hears from surrounding businesses, upwards of \$1 million is generated for the local economy each summer. He added because Pike Lake is just a little farther from the city, people will wait to shop until they arrive in town, whether it's Mount Forest or Harriston.

“The whole main street benefits, whether it's gas, the Tim Hortons, it's everything,” said Herb.

“My husband always believed in that - we support as much as we can local,” added Joan.

Herb noted there have been many generations of families that have come through Pike Lake, calling the area home. He added there are people who have decided to bring their families to settle down in these northern Wellington County towns.

“The people that come here, for a small community of north Wellington County, there's a lot of dollars generated in to Mount Forest and Harriston and Arthur,” said Herb.

Considering how many people and dollars Highland Pines and Pike Lake draw each summer, they have become an essential part of the local economy. **BL**

ABOVE PHOTOS: Pike Lake Campground.
BELOW: Highland Pines Campground.

