



Terry Mayer/The Week

Stores line the downtown streets of Lake Geneva are already gearing up for the holiday season.

The season to switch gears

■ Locals and 'day trippers' keep local business busy

By Mike Heine
The Week

It's after Labor Day.

Leaves have begun changing colors.

Farm fields are being stripped of their crops.

Finding a parking spot in downtown Lake Geneva has become a whole lot easier.

Just going down Main Street and trying to spot license plates bearing "Land of Lincoln" has become more difficult to do.

Those are only some of the telltale signs that fall is here and the unofficial tourist season in Wisconsin's sixth-leading tourist county has officially come to an end.

But even with the many summertime, weeklong and weekend visitors heading home for the year, not all small-business owners are packing it in as might be expected. Instead, they're gearing up for what could be a busy winter.

"I can tell you that the falls are actually busier than the summers," said Alan Rohde, owner of Lake Geneva's Cornerstone Shoppe and president of the Lake Geneva Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. "We don't depend totally on tourists anymore."

Rohde considers tourists as the visitors who come to Walworth County from a three-hour drive away or more. Those are the folks who might not be back much until the weather warms.

Fortunately, throughout the year, Walworth County sustains a healthy population of "day trippers," or people who come here for a day of shop-

ping, dining or recreating before making a short drive home. Those folks usually come from the heavily populated and relatively close areas of Milwaukee, Chicago, Rockford and Madison, Rohde said.

"Our biggest segment year-round is day-trippers," said George Henerley, executive vice president for the Lake Geneva Area Chamber of Commerce. "We get a lot of people that come up just for the day. It's a little bit slower, but it certainly doesn't stop."

It is those pools of customers who Rohde says will carry most Walworth County businesses through the tough post-Christmas winter months.

"October, November and December is the golden quarter," Rohde said of some stores and retail businesses. "That's when many people do a lot of business."

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Hennerley said the months of September and October are typically busier than May and June for smaller Walworth County businesses.

The Cornerstone Shoppe has a plethora of unique gift items for the home that make it a popular Christmas shopping destination, Rohde said. With pictures, candles, furniture and accessories, "We can do a whole house from beginning to end and from front door to back door," Rohde said.

Downtown Lake Geneva's Overland Sheepskin Company is another one of those businesses that rely on the holiday rush and fall's reds and oranges to make some green cash.

Owner Mary Klein said her store is different from many other downtown shops because they are almost strictly a fourth-quarter business.

"We sell for winter," Klein said. "We have fur boots, coats, hats. When everybody else is selling like hotcakes in July and August, we're sitting here twiddling our thumbs."

While Klein and her staff are getting ready for the winter rush with their regular products, other summer-themed stores are unpacking their cold weather product lines and re-lining the shelves.

Clear Water Outdoor in downtown Lake Geneva is just one of the many Walworth County



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Sarah Schuster, owner of Clear Water Outdoor in Lake Geneva, shows her winter clothing line.

stores that primarily specializes in summertime products and services.

"We're changing over all of our inventory and getting ready for snow," said Sarah Schuster, owner of Clear Water Outdoor. "We want to keep people playing outside. We don't need people to have cabin fever."

Schuster said her store is packing away some of the summertime products, such as camping and kayaking equipment, and replacing it with warm clothing and gear for sledding, snow shoeing and cross-country skiing.

Having just opened the store in May, Schuster doesn't know what to expect in her first winter. She guesses customer traffic will slow somewhat as it already has since Labor Day.

Schuster is hoping the store's philosophy will keep a few people coming through the doors.

"Our mission statement is to

get people outside and have a healthy and active life at any time of year at any age," she said.

While Schuster just wants to get people to play outside every season, Joan Schenk, executive director of the Walworth County Visitors Bureau, wants everyone's winter playtime to be in Walworth County.

New winter attractions in the area, such as planned or already open indoor waterparks at several county resorts, should help bring in more cold weather visitors. That will benefit countless local business owners.

"We need to increase (tourism) during the fall and through spring, and make Walworth County a year-round destination," Schenk said. "If we bring (tourists) here in the winter, then they can go out, do their shopping, go to restaurants and continue to contribute to our economy."

