

Tourists, money coming to area

By Silandara Bartlett

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The harvest is coming in. And it seems we have a bumper crop – of people.

The abundance of people brings with it increased business.

“Cashiers has been discovered,” echoes from bank managers, realtors and restaurant owners alike.

Business owners and managers agree that Cashiers is busier this summer than last. Banks are seeing increases in deposits and loans.

“Deposits and loans are growing. The area is growing and we’re growing with it,” Gary Peek, manager of Carolina Community Bank, said.

Deposits at Wachovia Bank are up about 17 percent over last year, manager Brian Renfro said. He said he isn’t sure if the increase is from new accounts or if existing customers are depositing more.

Cashiers is growing more quickly than other North Carolina counties, said Chris George, regional manager for Centura, Bank. The growth Centura is seeing is in retail and real estate, due to high-end customers attracted to the area.

What are they attracted to?

Answers range from the cooler weather to the relaxed pace of life that Cashiers has to offer.

“They’re flocking up to the mountains to get cool,” said Ralph Nichols of Cashiers Exxon. “It’s a little oasis in the mountains.” We’re also seeing the benefit of recent growth in construction, he said.

Bonnie Schley of the Market Basket agrees with the beat-the-heat theory. Many of the people are from Atlanta and Augusta and she expects more year-round traffic, both from people up for the weekend and year-round residents, she said.

“Atlanta’s finally discovered us,” is realtor Gil Bannerman’s theory. Baby boomers with discretionary income due to inheritances from their post-depression-era parents are buying retirement or second homes here.

Resort areas all across the country are doing well, he said.

However, some area businesses aren’t experiencing that much more traffic than last year. Laurelwood Mountain Inn can only get so busy since they only have 21 rooms, said owner Bob Dews. “We had good year last year, and we’re pleased where it is this year,” he said.

Cornucopia has a line everyday at lunch, said owner Scott Peterkin. It is busier this year, but they can only seat so many people and they don’t know how many people drive by, see the line and keep on going, he said.

The Chamber of Commerce hasn’t seen a lot of new businesses open this year – less than last year in fact, said chamber president Sue Bumgarner. Last year, the Shops on the Green plaza opened giving way to about 11 new businesses. Only five have opened this year, she said, as not a lot of new business space has opened up.

Is this economic upswing a flash-in-the-pan? The consensus is a resounding no.

“I think it’s probably going to be a general upswing,” said Schley. Nichols agrees. He expects next year to be even busier.

“It looks to me like this is going to continue for several years,” Peek said. More people are learning of Cashiers, buying land and building homes here, he said.

They are also getting post office boxes. About 100 new families have moved into the area so far this season, postmaster Linda Lane said. The influx began in May, earlier than last year, when 60 new families introduced themselves to the post office, starting in June.

“I anticipate the season running later this year,” she said. And she expects more people to visit in the winter as well as the summer, to get away and unwind and have less pressure to do and to be.

As they rounded the hill after the long, steep climb, through wooded curves of green – fortunately they were driving an air-conditioned SUV – their eyes widened in delight as they realized they were finally here.

They had come from the south, from where the harsh sun beats down on corridors of concrete and asphalt and the air swims with water that makes it to the ground not as rain but as salty trickles of sweat clinging to bodies desperate for respite.

They had heard rumor of a place, high in the mountains, where the valley was lush and green, where the sun didn’t shine with such intensity. An oasis in the mountains, some called it.

They had discovered it – Cashiers.