

## Some motels, theaters down

BRANSON, from Page 1A

last year's take of \$3,053,233 for the same period. However, June's revenue climbed from \$473,963 in 2002 to \$518,935 this year. Only March and June have seen revenues above last year's total.

Since 1993, sales tax revenue has climbed each year for a total of \$12.1 million last year. The strongest months are yet to come in September through November.

According to Branson's tourism tax revenue, hotel revenue from January through May — the latest figures available — is down 9 percent over the same period last year. There are 198 lodging facilities in town with 17,427 rooms.

Mike Combs, president of the Branson Lodging Association, says some area motel owners have reported business off as much as 35 percent over last year. Combs owns the Ramada Limited, where he said he's even with last year, his best year ever.

Combs doesn't agree that deep discounts such as some local hotels are offering will solve the problem.

"The ones that are suffering are the lower-priced motels," Combs said. "The higher-priced hotels are holding their own. Most people who are lowering their price are shooting themselves in the foot. You still have the same amount of expenses and upkeep, but by trying to increase sales by lowering your rate, you're actually lowering revenue."

Theater income has fared even worse, down 14 percent from January through May, according to tourism tax figures. There are 46 theaters with 56,797 seats.

Onstage Entertainment, the company that owns the Country Tonite and Legends in Concert theaters, has seen the empty seats.

"We're down from last year, but we're holding our own," said spokeswoman Crystal McClary.

Country Tonite cut back the number of performances and laid off a few staffers during the spring, but is gearing up now that the theater began its fall schedule of daily performances.

"It was painful, but right now, we're calling everyone back," McClary said. Although people are not making advance reservations as often this season, she's optimistic about fall and holiday attendance.

"The bus market is very strong, and they always book way in advance," McClary said.

### FRUGAL VISITORS

Although there's not a definitive way to count Branson visitors, Summers said estimates indicate that there have been about the same number as last year, but they came later and spent less. Last year's estimates for total visitors ranged from 7 million to 8 million.

This year, families didn't start taking vacations in full force until early July, Summers

### Want to go?

The Festival of American Music and Craftsmanship runs from Thursday through Oct. 25. More than 100 visiting crafters will demonstrate. New this year are the Best of Missouri Hands, juried artists showcased throughout the festival.

Music includes bluegrass and country with the Southern Gospel Nights concerts in the amphitheater expanded with

seven nights of top-name Southern gospel music.

Also new this year is a replica of Mark Twain's boyhood home with storytelling, and an old-fashioned barn dance. The park is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sundays and 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturdays.

For ticket information, call 800-831-4386 or go online to silverdollarcity.com.

### Sales tax revenue

Branson's 1-percent sales tax revenue in June rose 9.5 percent over the same period last year. For the year through June, however, figures show revenue down \$50,000 — just under 1.7 percent — from 2002.



SOURCE: CITY OF BRANSON, NEWS-LEADER

said. And average spending based on interview surveys show they spent \$53 a day this year for incidentals compared with \$63 a day last year, Summers said.

In talking with area lodging and theater owners, July and August improved, Summers said.

That was the case at Silver Dollar City, Rau said. Through July, visitors to the park that annually attracts 2 million visitors were down by 125,000 people. After August, the park is down only 109,000 visitors.

Still, the drop — combined with general corporate belt tightening — led Herschend Family Entertainment Corp. in August to eliminate 60 full-time positions among the 2,500 employees at its five Branson properties.

Some of those visitors may have defected to the company's new attraction, Celebration City. About 400,000 people have visited the amusement park just three miles east of Silver Dollar City. Celebration City is on target to meet its projected attendance of 500,000 when it closes for the season on Nov. 1, Rau said.

Summers also said he's had reports of increased attendance at outdoor venues, including golf courses and lake attractions. At White Water, Herschend's water park, attendance has been up with 260,000 visitors compared with 240,000 last year, Rau said. Monday was the park's final day of the season.

### BETTER THAN MOST

Nationally, the tourism industry continues to suffer, with Newsday recently calling it the "Bummer of '03." Tourism officials cite bad weather, high gasoline prices and job jitters as rea-

sons people are opting to stay home. And travel destinations that try to boost visitor numbers with big discounts have led to reports of weak profits.

In New York City, attendance at Broadway shows this summer dropped from 2.9 million last year to 2.7 million, Newsday reports. The *Washington Post* reported hotel occupancy in the region was at 69.5 percent, down 2.5 percent from a year ago.

In that context, Branson is holding its own.

At Silver Dollar City on Monday, thousands of pumpkins and perky scarecrows are ready for the Festival of American Music and Craftsmanship that begins on Thursday. A fair crowd of tourists braved a day that started with rain, including Tom and Rose Blankenship of Anderson, who with their son, T.J., 13, and Niki, 10, watched a blacksmith at work. The family also visited Branson in May and expect to come again for the holidays. The economy has affected their travel plans, said Tom Blankenship, an information technologist for Wal-Mart.

"If we were doing a lot better right now, we'd probably be taking more vacations," he said.

The festival may be especially inviting this year, Rau said. "We are living in an extraordinarily complicated time right now," Rau said. "This festival, the heart and soul of this place since the beginning, hearkens back to simpler times, a less complicated world. People come back to see old friends, the same weaver, the same jeweler. And this appeals to many senses: the hillside colors, the smells of outdoor cooking, the sounds of mountain music."

Among those visitors will see again this year is portrait artist Betty Jo Alkire of Rockaway Beach. She's been drawing at the crafts festival for 32 years.

"Last year, I did a portrait of a grandchild of a child I had drawn," Alkire said. "I have people who come back every year with the new kids."

On Monday, Alkire sketched a portrait of 12-year-old Heather Hannon of Moore, Okla., who was visiting the park with her grandparents Charles and Leta Hannon.

It's their first visit to Silver Dollar City this year, Leta Hannon said. Their vacation pattern also changed this year.

"We're staying a little closer to home," she said.