



Tourism regional team facilitates northwest Georgia amusement park expansion, increased visitation

OVERVIEW

Lake Winnepesaukah Amusement Park (Lake Winnie) opened in Rossville, Ga., in June 1925 as a family-owned swimming and picnicking park. For 90 years, families have been making the northwest Georgia destination part of their vacation plans, and the park has grown to include thrill rides and amusements for all ages. Lake Winnie has been recognized by Travel + Leisure as one of America's Top 10 Family Amusement Parks.

CHALLENGE

Primarily featuring roller coasters and other thrill rides, Lake Winnie wanted to increase attendance and retain customers that were being drawn to combination amusement/water parks in the Southeast. Meanwhile, in 2011, the state legislature passed the Georgia Tourism Development Act (TDA), which authorized tax credits to promote the development of new tourism attractions or expansions of existing tourism attractions. Under the law, projects must cost a minimum of \$1 million, attract at least 25 percent of their visitors from out of state by the third year, and must not directly compete with existing Georgia businesses. Approved projects can recover state sales tax revenues equivalent to as much as 25 percent of the development costs over a 10-year period.

In 2012, Lake Winnie began planning a \$6 million water park that would be incorporated into its existing location. The project was designed to comply with the TDA in order to qualify for the tax credits, but the TDA became stalled as the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) Tourism Division and the Georgia Department of Revenue worked out the implementation process. Park owners began to question whether they would be able to take advantage of the credits.

In 2013, the state legislature adopted a revised version of the TDA that resolved the implementation problems posed in the first version. DCA became the agency charged with oversight of TDA applications and projects, and the act required that commissioners of both GDEcD and DCA approve the TDA applications.

Attraction:

- Lake Winnepesaukah Amusement Park

Expansion Project:

- Soak Ya Water Park

New jobs:

- Seasonal: 60
- Full-time: 3

Investment:

- \$6 million

Incentive:

- The Georgia Tourism Development Act (TDA), which authorizes tax credits for qualifying projects. Approved projects can recover state sales tax revenues equivalent to as much as 25 percent of the development costs over a 10-year period.

State Partners:

- Georgia Department of Economic Development, Tourism Division
- Georgia Department of Community Affairs
- Georgia Department of Revenue
- Northwest Georgia Joint Development Authority

Georgia Travel Region:

- Historic High Country



Senator Jeff Mullis and Georgia Tourism's Historic High Country regional tourism project manager facilitated conversations and meetings between Lake Winnie's owners, the local development authority, GDECD and DCA to ensure proper application for the tax credits. The tourism project manager also helped decipher the steps and the protocols involved in the approval process. By facilitating collaboration, the tourism project manager helped simplify the process of applying for the credits for Lake Winnie and gave them assurance they were on the right track. As a result, Lake Winnie was the first Georgia tourism business to apply and be approved for the TDA credits.

RESULTS

In summer 2013, Lake Winnie opened the largest expansion in its history, the five-acre Soak Ya Water Park, featuring tube slides, body slides, an 880-foot-long Crazy River, a crossing activity for pre-teens, a kids play area and more. The park added approximately 60 seasonal jobs and three full-time jobs to operate the water park.

As a result of opening the new addition, Lake Winnie's attendance grew by 17 percent in Soak Ya's first summer season. In its second summer, attendance grew by double that amount: 34 percent. By 2014, Lake Winnie employed more than 400 people to keep the park operations running smoothly. "The water park has been a tremendous draw for customers around the region," says Tennyson Dickinson, director for Lake Winnie. "It has expanded our marketing reach and made us more relevant to the consumer in terms of what tourists and families are looking for."

The TDA helped make Lake Winnie's expansion possible, and it allows for future growth and development. As Lake Winnie celebrates its 90th anniversary in 2015, it is adding a new interactive attraction to the water park that gives visitors even more to do during their visit. "We had envisioned this growth, but the financial capital was so significant to invest," Dickinson says. "The TDA really made it more realistic for us and gave us the incentive to take a risk." The addition of the Soak Ya Water Park also has helped Lake Winnie connect to what made the park so popular when it first opened. "Lake Winnie started as a spring-fed lake, and it grew to include a flume ride. The ride portion of the park grew, and that became what we were known for," Dickinson says. "Soak Ya has helped us get back to our focus of water and water play."

Dickinson recommends that other tourism destinations become familiar with the TDA and call on the resources in Georgia Tourism and DCA to understand its requirements. "This is not for the faint of heart. Thoroughly familiarize yourself with the act and what is involved in the record-keeping, and avail yourself of all the knowledge that Georgia Tourism's and DCA's teams can impart," Dickinson says. "We're very thankful that we did."

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- Tennyson Dickinson, Director,
Lake Winnepesaukah Amusement Park



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15TOUR079 - June 2015