

2019 Spring TACO Meeting & Trade Show Review *Looking Back ...*

May 2019



WOW! We've had a very successful Meeting & Trade Show!

About 225 park operators, vendors and industry officials attended TACO's annual Spring Meeting and Trade Show at the Lake Conroe / Houston North KOA Holiday in Montgomery.

The April 23 - 25 meeting included TACO's annual awards program as well as educational sessions on marketing, customer service, pricing, propane and front desk management software. Attendees were brought up to date on important legislative and legal affairs.

A highlight of the event was a moving keynote address by Janine Stange, who overcame paralyzing stage fright to sing the National Anthem in all 50 states while dealing with a personal crisis and establishing a special connection with Medal of Honor winners.

Stange encouraged park operators to seize the moment and not procrastinate when it comes to pursuing their dreams.

"If there's something you've always wanted to do, and are waiting for the right moment, don't wait, do it now," she said, adding, "Within you is the ability to do exploits, something uncommon with your life because the world needs those talents and you can't give them from your comfort zone."

TACO's annual trade show featured some 50 vendors who showcased their products, including several park models and a covered wagon. The Trade Show concluded with a "TACO Unity Dinner" and the association's annual auction, which raises money for TACO's legislative affairs program.

Park operators complemented their Trade Show shopping by attending half a dozen educational sessions, most of which took place during the third and final day of the Spring Meeting.

Michael Moore, general manager of Texas Advertising, discussed the various methods of marketing a park through print and online platforms, the importance of tracking results, and the need to sustain marketing and advertising efforts to both build and maintain a park's customer base.

Larry Brownfield, director of franchise development for Billings, Mont.-based Kampgrounds of America, Inc. (KOA), talked about customer service, focusing on the differences between "high tech" and "high touch" ways to enhance the guest experience.

The reality, of course, is that park operators need to provide both high tech and high touch customer service to their guests.

"To maintain a good high tech/high touch relationship is going to cost money," Brownfield said, citing the need to provide Wi-Fi service as an example.

"Wi-Fi is just as important to people as water, sewer and electric," he said.

But Brownfield also encouraged park operators to view Wi-Fi

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Legislative Updates Focus of TACO Meeting

In the coming weeks the Texas legislature will consider legislation that would limit annual increases in property taxes by 3.5 to 4 percent.

However, any tax legislation that's approved by the legislature will still require the support of a majority of Texas voters in the November election, according to Brian Schaeffer, Executive Director and CEO of the Texas Association of Campground Owners (TACO).

"The new property tax rollback will be voted on in November," said Schaeffer, who briefed Texas park operators during a legislative review Tuesday afternoon that kicked off day one of TACO's annual spring meeting, was held at the Lake Conroe / Houston North KOA Holiday in Montgomery, Texas.

Schaeffer, who joined TACO's longtime legislative consultant, Ron Hinkle, in providing the legislative update, said property taxes have become a big issue in Texas in recent years, affecting business and residential property owners alike.

"At our spring meeting, we had probably 10 campgrounds that have had their taxes increase by more than 50 percent and five campgrounds by over 100 percent within the past three years," he said, adding that one park saw its taxes jump by 400 percent.

TACO has been encouraging its members to hire a tax mitigation company, such as Dallas-based P.E. Pennington & Co, Inc., to fight to reduce their property taxes.

"We are encouraging all of our members to protest (property tax increases)," Schaeffer said. "If you protest, whatever the outcome is, your taxes are frozen for two years. We think the protest is the way to go."

Schaeffer added that the more businesses and residents contest their local property tax increases, the less likely local jurisdictions will fight, simply because of the logjam created by such protests.

The Texas Legislature is also expected to vote on a new law in the coming weeks that would ban public schools from starting their annual school sessions earlier than the third Monday of August.

Early school start dates hurt the tourism industry, of course, not only by shortening the amount of time families have available to take vacations, but by limiting the amount of time high school students can work at campgrounds, RV parks and other tourist venues.

Eight years ago, TACO secured passage of a rule that prevented school districts from starting school sessions earlier than the fourth Monday in August. But Schaeffer said school districts

found loopholes that enabled them to evade the law.

The new legislation closes the loopholes and will make it more difficult for school districts to start their sessions earlier than the third Monday of August.

If the school start date legislation is approved, it will take effect during the summer of 2020.

"We are optimistic it will be approved," Schaeffer said.

In other government affairs updates, Schaeffer told park operators that state funding has been restored through the Governor's Office of Tourism to promote travel to Texas in other states. The funding amounts to half of one percent of all of the transient occupancy taxes (TOT) collected in Texas.



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Successful Meeting & Trade Show!

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not as an amenity, but as an essential service. "It's a utility, not an amenity," he said.

Private parks, however, still have a long way to go to improve the quality of their Wi-Fi service. "Four in 10 campers have a negative opinion of the quality of Wi-Fi at a campground," he said.

There are rewards for parks that make the necessary investments to provide high quality Wi-Fi service, however. "If you provide better Wi-Fi, people stay three more days," Brownfield said, citing KOA statistics. "You're going to have to spend (money) to get it."

Brownfield also cautioned park operators to provide a "high touch" response whenever they experience a "high tech slam" in the form of a negative online review.

"When you read a (negative) review, wait at least two hours before you respond online," he said. "Write your response offline. Read it. Then let a somewhat neutral party read it next, and then submit it," he said. "You're always looking for the ability to cultivate a relationship."

Jamie McGehee, who represents the Astra Campground Manager reservation software system, urged park operators to do their due diligence and ask lots of questions before settling on a software system provider.

"Every provider has a different pricing model," she said. "What does your 'monthly fee' really cover? Understand what you're getting for those fees. Who is paying (those fees) and where is the cost coming from? Is there a credit card fee? What happens if you stop paying annual fees?"

Ask about training support and setup.

"Know how much time is required," she said. "How many hours are required to get (the software system) set up? If you pay for additional training, how much will it cost if you have new employees every year?"

Park operators need to have a clear idea of what they really get when they sign up for a software system support package, she said.

"Do I have a dedicated support manager or point of contact? If you're sending an email out to a black hole and you're not getting a response you're not going to be very happy," she said. "What is the response time? Is there off hour business support on weekends and holidays?"

McGehee also said it behooves park operators to simply ask their peers in the industry what they think about different software systems and what their experience has been.

It's also imperative to select a reservation software company that has ample experience in the campground industry and plans to continue serving the outdoor hospitality market.

McGehee said it's also worthwhile to ask reservation software providers about the feasibility of using two different reservation systems at the same time. Some parks may want to consider transitioning their reservations for next year to a new system while they continue using their existing system during the current year.

TACO's Spring Meeting included a workshop with April Dawn Richardson, director of alternative fuels safety for the Railroad Commission of Texas, which oversees permitting for propane sales and service as well as compressed and liquefied natural gas.

Richardson reviewed the various licensing requirements for businesses that sell and store alternative fuels and noted that there are both management level and employee level exams. She also distributed a worksheet that outlined the requirements for cylinder filling service stations.

TACO Executive Director and CEO Brian Schaeffer led a legal affairs session and also joined Ron Hinkle, the association's longtime lobbyist, in providing legislative updates.



TACO has spent many years working to amend existing state laws to make it easier to remove guests on the basis of "theft of service" or "trespassing" legislation.

The idea, Schaeffer said, is to create the legal basis to quickly remove guests who fail to pay for site services or otherwise violate park rules, just as if they were staying in a hotel or motel.

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But TACO's efforts to modify state statutes mean little, Schaeffer said, if local law enforcement authorities know nothing about these statutes or if they automatically handle every kind of guest dispute as a "landlord-tenant" issue that has to go through a civil court process.

It is, therefore, up to park operators to visit with their local law enforcement authorities as soon as possible to find out how they interpret state laws governing "theft of service" and "trespassing" at RV parks, Schaeffer said.

"You need to talk to local law enforcement from an educated standpoint. Visit with law enforcement – you need them to be on your side," he said, adding that the park operators can print out latest versions of applicable state laws involving expulsions and evictions, which are posted at www.tacomembers.com.

"Take the laws and ask (your local law enforcement authorities), 'How do you interpret this?'" Schaeffer said. "You need to be able to approach these people, get their opinion and know up front what they are going to be able to do to help you or not help you."

If local law enforcement officials still refuse to enforce state statutes involving RV parks, ask them what you can do to improve your chances of having guests quickly removed if they fail to pay or otherwise violate park rules. This may involve having every guest sign a "site service agreement," if they haven't done so previously.

"If they say (they will not remove guests based on state 'theft of service' or 'trespassing' laws), then you have to learn how to process evictions quickly," Schaeffer said, adding that park operators have to proactively "adapt" to their local circumstances if



law enforcement will not honor RV park specific laws.

"Learn to process evictions quickly and ruthlessly," Schaeffer said. Otherwise, he said, your park will lose money.

Schaeffer noted that some park operators run criminal background and credit checks on every guest. He added that when companies call to reserve a block of campsites for their workers, background checks should be run on every guest.

One park operator attending Schaeffer's seminar said it's also worthwhile to obtain contact information for every guest's "next of kin" in case they die or some other emergency situation occurs while they are at the park.

On the legislative front, check out the article on page 2.

Seminar powerpoints are online at:
TACOMemebbers.com (password required)

Congratulations to the 2019 TACO Award Winners!

The Texas Association of Campground Owners (TACO) presented awards as the Texas association kicked off the first full day of its annual spring meeting and trade show at the Lake Conroe/Houston North Campgrounds of America (KOA) in Montgomery, Texas.



TACO Executive Director and CEO Brian Schaeffer presented the association's awards following the breakfast session attended by approximately 225 campground owners, vendors and industry officials from across the Lone Star State.

"This was by far the most competitive awards program we've ever had in our 46 year history," he said, noting that one-and-a-half times as many parks competed for awards this year.

Schaeffer attributed the spike in award applications to TACO's decision to post the award nomination forms online at www.TACOAwards.com.

2019 Award Winners

Large Park of the Year

Jellystone Park Camp-Resort – Wichita Falls
wichitafallsjellystone.com

Medium Park of the Year

Jellystone Park Camp-Resort – Tyler
jellystonetyler.com

Large Park Accommodations of the Year

Jellystone Park Camp-Resort – Kerrville
jellystoneguadalupe.com

Small Park Accommodations of the Year

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Other Awards

Cheryl McLaughlin of Hatch RV Park also received a service award as outgoing President of TACO, while Terry and Sharon Dick, managers of the Lake Conroe / Houston North KOA Holiday, received a host award.



Jellystone Park Camp-Resort – Wichita Falls
Large Park of the Year



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Medium Park of the Year



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