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R.V. Owners Skip Camp And Park At Wal-Mart

By OTTO POHL

SHERIDAN, Wyo. — Frank Sharp-ski Jr. surveyed the Wal-Mart parking lot near his R.V. campground on a recent afternoon. “There are six of them today,” he said, counting the rigs that he figured would not be spending any time or money at his campground that night. “And that’s a slow night.”

R.V. campground owners like Mr. Sharp-ski, co-owner of the Big Horn Mountain KOA Kampground here, say they are increasingly feeling financial pain caused by the growing popularity of parking R.V.’s at nationwide chains like Wal-Mart. It is a debate pitting R.V. owners against R.V. campground operators that is played out on vast expanses of asphalt, a controversy fueled by rising gas prices and intensified by R.V.-oriented Internet chat sites.

R.V. camping is the nation’s fastest-growing tourism segment and is expected to grow strongly as baby boomers retire. There are now seven million R.V.’s on the roads, and that number is expected to continue to grow, industry groups say.

Wal-Mart is not the only chain store allowing free overnight R.V. camping — Kmart, Costco, and Flying J truck stops do as well — but Wal-Mart remains the most popular destination. Campgrounds charge between \$25 and \$40 a night.

The growing number of R.V. owners looking for a place to spend the night has helped force the issue into the public debate in cities including Fairbanks, Alaska; Rapid City, S.D.; and Burlington, Wis. Prompted by complaints from campgrounds and others, several communities have decided to begin actively enforcing laws banning parking-lot camping.

In Sheridan, however, Mr. Sharp-ski’s efforts to restrict the practice ran straight into the influence of Wal-Mart, he said.

“It was like banging my head against a wall,” he said of a meeting last year with the Chamber of Commerce to encourage enforcement of existing parking restrictions. “They’re not going to step on Wal-Mart’s toes.”

Mr. Sharp-ski did not get a warmer reception the other day from the R.V. campers at the Wal-Mart when he



Anne Sherwood for The New York Times

An R.V. with engine trouble spent a recent night next to the Wal-Mart parking lot in Billings, Mont., despite posted signs that prohibit camping.

suggested that parking-lot camping should be banned.

“Would you shut down grocery stores if they were putting restaurants out of business?” a camper, Marvin Boehme, asked him.

Phyllis and Tom Force emerged from their 26-foot Flair R.V. to add their opinions.

“You wouldn’t have to be out here if people liked your camp,” Mr. Force told Mr. Sharp-ski.

Mrs. Force was more practical.

“The other day I needed a haircut so I went in and got one,” she said. “Can’t do that at a KOA.”

Most Wal-Marts provide only space for the R.V.’s to park, not electrical hookups or dumping stations. The company says its invitation to R.V.’s, which has been in place for decades, is not predatory competition. “It is very simply an extension of customer service,” said Sharon Weber, a spokeswoman.

Many R.V. owners agree, and Wal-Mart camping has drawn an informal but enthusiastic following.

Many belong to Wal-Mart Bound International, an R.V. club whose only requirement for membership is having camped in at least five Wal-Mart parking lots. To help these so-called Wally Worlders find the nearest Wal-Mart, a couple from Carlsbad, Calif., published a book called

“Wal-Mart Locator.”

Whenever restrictions loom, an R.V. owners group called the Escapees keeps its 35,000 members abreast of developments on its Web site, www.escapees.com, and by an e-mail newsletter. Communities considering a crackdown are often barged with e-mail messages threatening a boycott by R.V. owners.

Chuck Woodbury, editor of free-

Campground owners accuse retailers of unfair competition.

campgrounds.com, believes that Wal-Mart has become the largest R.V. campground in the country. It is impossible to confirm that claim because Wal-Mart does not keep track of the number R.V.’s parking in its lots, but it would only take about three R.V.’s a night at each of Wal-Mart’s roughly 4,000 North American stores to surpass the industry’s biggest campground chain, KOA, which has 450 locations in the United States and Canada.

The debate about Wal-Mart camp-

ing began as early as 1999, when the Escapees Web site excoriated supposedly restrictive camping policies by the Illinois Campground Owners Association and encouraged members to avoid any campground that belonged to the group.

“We got over 800 negative e-mails; it was really miserable,” says Craig Weber, co-owner of the Geneseo Campground in Geneseo, Ill., whose wife, Shari, was president of the campground owners association at the time. “There were threats saying they would come to our campgrounds, plug up our toilets and set our garbage Dumpsters on fire.”

Lori Vavak, the owner of the Double Dice RV Park in Elko, Nev., has decided to fight back in court. Ms. Vavak is suing the City of Elko for refusing to enforce an ordinance that bans overnight parking-lot camping. She is suing for \$1 million, seeking reimbursement for lost business, which she estimates at \$250,000 a camping season for the last four seasons. She must comply with 37 rules to retain her campground license, she says, and believes that anyone offering camping should do the same.

“We are happy to compete with legal competition,” Ms. Vavak said. “We cannot compete with free, illegal competition.”

Ms. Weber of Wal-Mart said: “We

are not a campground and haven’t claimed to be. Being able to have R.V.’ers park overnight is simply a customer convenience.”

In Billings, Mont., a crackdown on parking-lot camping began in July when complaints about the large numbers of R.V.’s at the local Wal-Mart spurred the city into enforcing a 1960’s-era parking ordinance. Security officers hired by Wal-Mart now hand fliers to R.V. drivers who pull in for the night. Complaints from the R.V. community have been swift.

“It’s been a tempest,” says Nicole Cromwell, the supervisor in charge of enforcing city codes. Ms. Cromwell said the city had received hundreds of protest e-mail messages, and the local newspaper had published a steady stream of letters about the conflict.

Ken Stellmacher, a spokesman for KOA, said his company would prefer to peacefully coexist. “We’ve extended an olive branch to Wal-Mart to see if we can find common ground,” Mr. Stellmacher said.

It is unclear that any olive branch could resolve the issue, however, and so the battle continues. And that is not likely to change anytime soon, said Mr. Woodbury of freecampground.com.

“These people have a lot of time on their hands,” he said of his readers.