

Great Wolf reducing the days it will be open

By Barry Adams, Wisconsin State Journal

October 23, 2008 --- Great Wolf Lodge in Lake Delton will be closed for six days in November and four days in December in an effort to save money.

Great Wolf is one of the largest waterpark resorts in the Wisconsin Dells area but it has little meeting and convention space.

The closings, all on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, are on days that have typically been slow for the resort, an official with Madison-based Great Wolf Resorts said.

The move will allow the 436-room property, which opened in 1997, to "both manage expenses and perform maintenance," said spokesman Steve Shattuck.

"Anyone can appreciate a prudent approach to operational expense management," he said.

No layoffs will be required because there is minimal staffing on those days. Much of the savings will be in utilities, Shattuck said.

Part of the reason it has been slow, said Jeff Coy, a hotel waterpark industry expert based near Phoenix, Ariz., is that the resort has limited convention and meeting space.

Other major waterpark resorts, including other Great Wolf Lodge properties around the country, have been increasing meeting and convention space over the last two to three years in an effort to draw business travelers and increase weekday bookings.

Great Wolf has just 5,400 square feet of meeting space at its Lake Delton resort, making it one of the smallest among major resorts in the Dells area. It also is land-locked with little room to expand, Coy said.

Kalahari and Chula Vista resorts each has more than 100,000 square feet of meeting space, while Glacier Canyon Lodge Conference Center, adjacent to the Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort, recently completed a project that doubled its meeting space to more than 55,000 square feet.

"It was the piece of our business that was missing and there was a pent-up demand," said Joe Eck, sales and marketing director for the Wilderness and Glacier Canyon, which combine for more than 1,000 rooms. "We can handle trade shows, we can handle conferences. It's pretty ideal for what we need."

Tourism officials say they can't recall a major waterpark resort closing for a number of days due to a lack of business.

Some resorts may limit waterpark hours during the week or close briefly for maintenance but Coy said closing the entire property is unusual.

"I haven't heard of anybody closing for entire days," Coy said. "If you can't accommodate business travelers and group meeting attendees and you rely only on the leisure segment, then it's going to be very hard."

Romy Snyder, executive director of the Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau, said November is a slow time for most businesses in the area. She said her office received a call from Great Wolf last week about the closing dates. She doesn't see it having a negative effect on the area's image.

"I think what people are concerned about in the Dells is that there are quality attractions," Snyder said. "I think they can still expect that when they come here."

Through its subsidiaries and affiliates, Great Wolf owns and operates 11 resorts in the U.S. and Canada, and is building a Great Wolf Lodge in Concord, N.C., that is scheduled to open next spring with 16,000 square feet of meeting space.

Late last year, the company announced that its 404-suite Great Wolf Lodge in Grapevine, Texas, would get another 203 rooms and its meeting space would expand to 27,000 square feet. Its Mason, Ohio, resort that opened in 2006 has 40,000 square feet of meeting space.

"We will never build without conference space," Shattuck said.

The first round of closings at the Lake Delton property are slated for Nov. 4-5, 11-12 and 18-19 with the second round scheduled for Dec. 2-3 and 9-10. No other closings are planned and the resort's 400 employees will still work five-day weeks, Shattuck said.

"It's going to have a minimal impact," Shattuck said of the closings. "We certainly believe that it will continue to be a popular destination."

There was a time when most resorts and many of the business in the Wisconsin Dells area would close between Labor Day and Memorial Day. Some resorts still do close but not those with large indoor waterparks and hundreds of rooms.

"I don't think we have a concern," Eck said, when asked about Great Wolf's closings. "We're still marketing ourselves as a year-round destination and that means 365 days a year."

Contact Barry Adams, Wisconsin State Journal at badams@madison.com or 608-252-6148.