

# WOODALL'S®

## CAMPGROUND MANAGEMENT

The Voice of the North American Campground Business

\$2.50 U.S./\$3.50 Canada

wcm@kconline.com

January 2006/Vol. 37 No. 1

### Escapees CEO Cathie Carr Appeals For Compromise in 'Wal-Mart' Debate

In a host of North American cities, the debate over whether — and how — to allow RVers free overnight parking in discount store parking lots continues to crop up as Escapees CEO Carr looks for a negotiated settlement

*There is one issue — above all others — that triggers debate in the RV park and campground sector. And that, of course, involves the growing number of consumers who choose to park free overnight at Wal-Mart, Flying J and other retail store parking lots rather than pay fees for space in established RV parks and campgrounds — public or private.*

*It's a fractious question that has spawned political confrontations between well meaning people in a host of cities from Emporia, Kan., to Billings, Mont. Many private park operators claim the practice of large stores permitting free overnight parking in unlicensed and unsanctioned locations is hurting their businesses — in a big way in some locales — while a lot of recreational vehicle enthusiasts and their supporting associations claim it's well within their rights to pull over for a night's rest in parking lots at which they are welcomed — tacitly or openly — by merchants hoping to make a few bucks on retail sales in the process.*

*Some veteran RVers proudly base their arguments in part on a long-standing tradition of "boondocking," openly parking in often remote locales at which they rely on the self contained systems of their units.*

*Several RV consumer groups sort of straddle the fence on this controversial issue. On one hand, the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA) publishes an atlas pinpointing the locations of retailers providing free overnight parking. Yet, the Cincinnati-based motorhome owners club urges its members to stop at these free locations only under certain limited circumstances. In a published etiquette statement, FMCA suggests that its all-motorized members not extend their awnings or overstay their welcome or leave a mess behind.*

*Free camping locations are also outlined in Wal-Mart's own publication and in a variety of other online sources.*

*This "Wal-Mart" debate generally beats up most when upset campground owners lobby local city officials to strengthen overnight parking restrictions. The confrontations can get ugly and personal, often embroiling newspaper editors, chambers of commerce and city council members who often wish this can of worms had never been opened in the first place. At the same time, these local confrontations have sometimes prompted consumer boycotts of RV parks and campgrounds throughout an entire community — whether all of the city's parks opposed the free camping or not.*

*Now, one of the nation's most vocal, pro-free parking advocates, the Livingston, Texas-based Escapees RV Club, is proposing a nationwide*

*solution to the ongoing overnight parking debate: Let consumers park overnight at a retailer's lot of their choosing, but never for more than one night at a time. In exchange, the Escapees want campground operators to stop pressuring state and local officials to impose additional overnight parking restrictions.*

*Representing roughly 35,000 full-time RV enthusiasts, the Escapees RV Club is relatively small compared to the million-member Good Sam Club or FMCA, which represents more than 127,000 RVing families. But the Escapees are, nevertheless, a force to be reckoned with in this market. In 1999, the club's members boycotted parks affiliated with the Illinois Campground Association (ICA) after its members tried to use state health codes to prevent Wal-Mart and other retailers from providing free overnight parking to RVers. The boycott worked, we're told, partly due to economic pressure and partly because Illinois state health officials at that time had not documented any violations of health codes by RV enthusiasts parking overnight in retail parking lots.*

*And while there are park operators today who still hold a grudge against the Escapees for what they considered heavy-handed tactics — especially in Illinois — the Escapees today remain as vocal as ever in their efforts to defend the rights of recreational vehicle owners to park overnight whenever and wherever, within reason, they please.*

*Instead of advocating boycotts, again, the Escapees currently are hoping to persuade RV clubs and campground associations to compromise on this issue, once and for all. Operating its own network of 19 campgrounds, members of the privately owned Escapees club believe they truly understand both sides of the overnight parking issue. With this in mind, Woodall's Campground Management Senior Editor Jeff Crider asked Escapees CEO Cathie Carr to address the club's position on the overnight parking issue and to discuss some of the obstacles that have kept industry groups at an impasse on this delicate topic for so long.*

*Carr, daughter of Escapees founders Joe and Kay Peterson, the club's current president and vice president, respectively, also took the opportunity to express her hopes that all parties will soon find common ground regarding this controversial issue.*

**\*\*\*\*\***  
**WCM: Given the fact that campground owners are worried about Wal-Mart and other retailers offering RVers the ability to camp overnight in their parking lots, how does the Escapees club view this issue?**

*Carr: Well, it could be a non-issue. We think that the folks staying in Wal-Mart are simply not our customers and I say "our" customers because we are campground owners, too. We recognize and would hope that other campground owners would recognize that when someone opts for a parking lot rest, that is a totally different experience and a totally different set of needs than the people who choose our campgrounds.*

*And so, the way we look at it is, "this time through, they're not our customer. Next time through, hopefully, they will be." I don't believe the answer to the issue is to force everyone into a campground regardless of what services they need. I think the answer is to come up with a solution, some kind of middle ground between the campground, the clubs and the consumers. We think the Escapees club has offered an ideal solution, a reasonable middle ground to all of this. We've been advocating and promoting that middle ground for years, but we're not getting as far along with*



Cathie Carr, CEO

*it as we would hope.*

**WCM: Tell us more, if you would, about this proposed solution.**

*Carr: The solution in our eyes is a three-way compromise. First, we think that the RV clubs need to educate the RVers about what we call a code of conduct or creed. In addition to other guidelines, there is a strong emphasis on staying one night only. We advocate that even if management says you can stay for three nights or a week or whatever they might tell you, you still stay one night and one night only.*

*If you are staying in a parking lot and disconnect your rig and want to tour around the area or get your vehicle worked on, that is not the appropriate place to stay. The parking lot is, in our opinion, an excellent choice if you're just going to rest for a few hours and move on or if you've traveled late in the evening and plan to get up early and head on down the road — if you need absolutely no services so that it is truly a rest.*

*So, the first piece (of the compromise) is RV clubs have to do their job to educate the RVers, and the second piece is the RVers must not abuse the hospitality that's offered. The third piece is that the campground owners have to agree to back off pursuing new legislation or stricter ordinances that force people into a campground regardless of their needs.*

*After all, there's no need to spend money on a rig that is self sufficient if we're going to stay in a campground every single night. Some of the campground associations, certainly the national ones, have pushed to have no competition with anyone, even state and federal parks. So, they need to back off and play fair.*

Escapees—continued on page 5

### Escapees' 'Good Neighbor Policy' Outline's Club's Ideal Overnight Parking Etiquette for Members

The following "Code of Conduct," supported by the Escapees RV Club and several other RV consumer organizations, including the Family Motor Coach Association and Airstream's Wally Byam Caravan Club, outlines the basic do's and don't's for members staying overnight in free locales such as retail store parking lots:

- (1) Stay one night only.
- (2) Obtain permission from a qualified individual.
- (3) Obey posted regulations.
- (4) No awnings, chairs or barbecue grills.
- (5) Do not use hydraulic jacks on soft surfaces (including asphalt).
- (6) Always leave an area cleaner than you found it.
- (7) Purchase gas, food or supplies as a form of thank you, when feasible.
- (8) Be safe! Always be aware of your surroundings and leave if you feel unsafe.

Prsrst Std  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit #229  
Des Plaines, IL



# Woodall's Salutes 70th Anniversary With '06 Park Directory's New Look

In recognition of its 70th anniversary, Woodall Publications Corp. has given the Woodall's North American Campground Directory a new look.

It's not just the look that is updated, according to a release from the company, a division of Affinity Group Inc., but also the content. With more than 15,000 RV parks and campgrounds listed, the directory provides up-to-date information. Each listing includes driving directions, overnight camping fees, information on pet restrictions, Internet availability, handicap accessibility, and any site length or width restrictions.

The special 2006 Collector's Anniversary Edition of the Woodall's North American Campground Directory not only features more than 15,000 listings of RV parks and campgrounds, the release states, but also RV service centers and attractions. The 2,000-page edition covers locations throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico, and includes detailed maps, as well as "Rules of the Road" for each state or province.

Woodall's is also celebrating with a "Win with Woodall's Sweepstakes" through which more than \$50,000 in prizes will be given away, including a

Pilgrim RV trailer. Entry forms can be found in the directories, as well as at the Woodall's website at [www.woodalls.com](http://www.woodalls.com).

Every year, the company reports, Woodall representatives travel to each privately owned campground to personally inspect them and ensure that they meet standards. For the 2006 edition, 260,000 changes have been incorporated into the publication.

In addition to the aforementioned data, each listing provides info regarding driving directions to a park, overnight camping fees, handicap accessibility and site widths. The directory also provides detailed travel information for



each state/province that highlights local attractions and points of interest, event listings, shopping opportunities and travel information sources. Plus, the directory offers at-a-glance charts that denote if a campground welcomes big rigs, is Internet-friendly or pet-friendly.

This year's directory also features a special editorial section entitled, "Celebrating 70 Years of RVing," which illustrates the evolution of RVing throughout the past 70 years.

Woodall's Extended Stay Guide, also a new feature of the 2006 Directory, gives information on places where

RV's can be parked for a month or longer. "RVers have relied on Woodall's for more than 70 years for a good reason," says Joe Daquino, Affinity Group's Multimedia Division vice president. "We are committed to providing them with the most current information available, which is why we have become the most complete and reliable source of campground, RV park, service center and attraction information. The 260,000 changes made this year alone represent our dedication to our customers."

In addition to the Woodall's North American Campground Directory, Woodall's also offers 2006 editions of its Eastern and Western editions, as well as seven regional campground guides: Canada, Far West, Great Lakes, New York/New England & Eastern Canada, Mid Atlantic, The South and Frontier West/Great Plains & Mountain Region.

The guides are available at bookstores, RV dealers, and at [www.woodalls.com](http://www.woodalls.com).

Woodall's is the official directory of the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA), Camping World's President's Club and Family Campers and RVers. ♦

## Escapees—from page 1

**WCM: What do you mean? What are the campground associations asking for?**

*Carr: I believe that what I call nasty fighting is giving the whole industry a black eye. The finger constantly gets pointed at the Escapees. But in my opinion, the Escapees and consumers are simply protecting their freedom. For instance, in Nevada, a half a dozen campground owners, with the apparent blessing of ARVC, went to the state committee on government affairs and pushed for the passage of a bill (last year) that would disallow anyone to park anywhere except in a campground in the state of Nevada. (The effort failed).*

*Then, in Billings, Mont., campground owners brought the same issue to the city council, and the statement from one of the campground owners was, and this was a quote: "Many of the people writing to complain are Escapees from Livingston, Texas, who are full-time RVers with no fixed address who live free in RVs. These people drain their tanks into storm drains and along roadways and dump their trash in other people's receptacles."*

*Of course, we were outraged. I don't even want to get into all of that. But my point is that each time a campground owner with backing from ARVC steps out and makes these outlandish allegations and pushes to get stricter ordinances or legislation—and bases it on the issues that they're basing them on—it is giving the industry a black eye. It's unfair, and it keeps us locked into a vicious circle of fighting. The bottom line is, if the different folks, the campground owners, the RVers and the RV clubs, would step up to the plate and just agree on middle ground, I believe we could all move forward to more positive issues and work as a unified group again. If they want to modify what we've offered, fine. Let's hear it. But we haven't heard any other offers for a solution to this. It's just...*

**WCM: All or nothing?**

*Carr: Yes. It's either, "stay in our parks or forget it. We simply won't tolerate free options."*

**WCM: So, that's the crux of the issue here, in your opinion, is that campground associations are taking an all-or-nothing position.**

*Carr: Yes, not all of them of course, but there are enough campground owners pushing this to keep the fires constantly burning.*

**WCM: But how much control do you really think the Escapees or any other clubs have over their members in terms of getting them to abide by certain rules or codes of conduct when it comes to parking overnight in a retailer's parking**

**lot?**

*Carr: I think we've done a wonderful job with our members. Obviously, there's always going to be people who violate any creed that is created, but they're probably the very people we don't want in our campgrounds, anyway.*

*Can we completely guarantee that no one is going to abuse the one-night-only policy? Probably not. But I'll tell you this: When we see it, when we hear a report of it, we take appropriate action. First, we make sure they are aware of the Good Neighbor Policy. If they continue to abuse the creed, we take it a step further. When we learned about one individual, we wrote and told them that if they continued to violate the creed, that they should remove their membership decal and that we would gladly give them a refund of their membership fee. So, we're willing to step up to the plate.*

**WCM: But campground operators also complain that discount retailers like Wal-Mart don't compete on a level playing field because they haven't had to comply with health code regulations that private campgrounds do. So, how can "The Escapees compromise" address this issue?**

*Carr: My feeling on it is that we're not comparing apples to apples. Wal-Mart is not a campground. It is a paved parking lot, nothing more. It's like a rest stop. It's not a campground. It's just a place to rest. They're not offering the facilities that a campground offers like sewer or water or swimming pools or playgrounds. All they're offering is a place to rest. I just don't see where a license would come into effect at all.*

*And as far as the health issues go, when we were working on the Illinois issue, back when there was a big stink in that state, the Illinois health department investigated and their quote was this: "Despite the widespread occurrence of overnight parking, the department has not received any health-related complaints pertaining to locations where recreational vehicles are allowed to park overnight at places other than campgrounds. This includes highway rest stops, truck stops and shopping center parking lots."*

**WCM: Don't you think it's futile to ask campers to spend only one night at a particular retail parking lot if they've already decided that that's what they're going to do.**

*Carr: I have seen since we came out with this creed a huge buy in from our membership. They get it. They understand that if they stay longer than one night they should stay in a campground. After you stay one night, you're camping. You're not resting any more. I think all RVers that are serious RVers,*

*whether they are FMCA members or some other consumer club, recognize that now. I think you would typically find two kinds of people abusing it or staying longer: The people that are just trying to live absolutely free on the road—and there are some out there—and then there are those who have no idea that staying more than one night is a problem because they received permission to do so. That group has never heard the side of the campground owner and is unaware of the Good Neighbor Policy we are advocating.*

*In other words, they are uneducated on the issue. This is why we would like to see more consumer clubs like Good Sam, with a million members, helping to spread the word about what is and is not acceptable. I must say I was very pleased to read a recent article written by Joe and Vicki Kieva in Highways (Dec 2005) explaining the issue from the side of the consumer.*

**WCM: So your members are telling you that they are sympathetic to the campground owners' business interests in this?**

*Carr: Yes, as long as they (park owners) remain reasonable and don't try to force them into their parks every single night even when they don't need services.*

**WCM: Is it your sense that it's only a minority of campers who try to stay at retailers' parking lots for extended periods of time?**

*Carr: Yes.*

**WCM: What will the Escapees do if campground associations engage in more legislative efforts to ban overnight parking?**

*Carr: The real shame in all of this is that I feel the Escapees' attention is being diverted from the good things that we can be doing. We would prefer to be working on important issues that affect all of us—fighting RV-specific taxes, supporting the RV-friendly signage campaign, safety issues, education issues, how to enjoy the RV lifestyle.*

**WCM: Do you think the overnight parking issue strains your relationship with ARVC and other campground associations?**

*Carr: Yes, unfortunately. We should be comrades and could be.*

**WCM: And so, in your view, if there is a way to resolve this issue, then it could pave the way for improved relations between the Escapees and other campground associations across the country?**

*Carr: Yes, to be sure, this is the only issue that cre-*

*ates a wall between us. I think we get along well on all the other issues.*

**WCM: What happens now with all this?**

*Carr: We've been at roundtables with ARVC and I think we agree that the Escapees compromise approach is logical and sensible. I just went to Louisville (RVIA's National RV Trade Show in Louisville in late November and early December), and we sat around the table with all the consumer groups, and with the manufacturers, Winnebago, Allegro, Newmar, all of them. And they all, as far as I could tell, felt that this is an excellent compromise.*

*But everybody's afraid of the radicals and the associations and the relationships that they have with others. I think our politics play against us. When I met with several of RVIA's legal team, they told me that you have to understand that (ARVC President) Linda Profizer has to deal with members who demand that ARVC do something to help them with these issues. And I said, "Well, I could claim to have the same problem. If I have members that say, 'I'm going to stay more than one night because Wal-Mart told me I could spend a week here, and, by gum, I'm going to spend a week here,' I would say, 'That's your right, but here's the refund for your membership dues and please take the decal off your rig.' At some point you have to take a stand."*

**WCM: It sounds like you're saying that there are people within ARVC and other campground associations who are vocal and are somewhat intransigent on this issue and that this hamstringing the organizations and keeps them from compromising.**

*Carr: That is my opinion, yes.*

**WCM: And that's where the impasse is?**

*Carr: I think so. There's really just a few snags out there. Let me give you this as an example. I read in an article that Woodall's Campground Management recently published that KOA says they prefer to peacefully coexist with Wal-Mart and has extended an olive branch. Well, if KOA is willing to peacefully coexist, and KOA is obviously the largest campground system that caters to overnight parking, if they can deal with the potential of somebody spending the night in a Wal-Mart instead of in their campground, then surely all the other campgrounds can deal with it. I continue to believe all of this fighting is doing harm to our entire industry. Surely campground owners can see that alienating or creating adversaries with all their own customers is a ridiculous position to be in. ♦*