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CONSIDERATIONS in ESTABLISHING CAMPING FACILITIES in ALABAMA



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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

ORIGINALLY ALL OF MANKIND were primitive campers. With the increase in building skills and permanent settlements, most persons moved into fixed housing units. Now, in developed areas of the world, camping has become a form of outdoor recreation.

Data collected for the 1970 Alabama Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan and a review of recent outdoor recreation literature indicated the supply of camping facilities was not adequate to meet potential demand at the prevailing price. Further study was needed to evaluate supply of and demand for camping facilities in Alabama.

A study of 35 campgrounds in Alabama was made to ascertain major factors to consider before committing resources to campground development. While the study involved data from 35 campgrounds, operators of only 30 were interviewed.

Few campgrounds visited were properly equipped to accommodate travel trailers. This was because of inadequate wiring and plumbing or poor layout arrangement of campsites. One of the campgrounds had no developed camping facilities and one consisted of excess space in a mobile home park.

The trend in camping site construction is toward areas catering to travel trailers and motor homes. Several operations were started to attract "one-night campers." Camping facilities for homes on wheels were designed much in the fashion of super-market parking areas.

Parking lot campgrounds, while not complying with standard requirements for camping, appeared to be profitable. "Lots" were placed in a location exposed to a large volume of travelers, of whom a small percentage were campers. Recreational activities and facilities were non-existent or were held to a minimum to reduce original capital outlay and maintenance costs.

However, most Alabama campgrounds were designed to attract weekend and vacation campers. Most of these areas were adjacent to bodies of water to provide guests with various recreational activities. Provision of facilities and activities was essential to attract customers and entice campers to stay more than one night. Since fewer campers visited vacation rather than overnight and weekend campgrounds, the owners depended upon repeat business to maintain a profitable operation. Several

such campgrounds which could not attract enough campers started renting mobile home space on a monthly basis.

Alabama's supply of camping sites was limited and poorly developed. Present demand for additional sites was greater than supply available at both types of campgrounds – overnight and weekend.

Several campground operations were losing money and several others did not appear to be profitable. Some failures appeared to be a result of poor business management, unfavorable locational features, and insufficient capital.

High cost of development was a limiting factor in the decision to invest in a campground. Further case study is needed to determine return to investment. However, there was a strong demand for properly located and well managed campgrounds – a rare sight in Alabama.

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Considerations in Establishing Camping Facilities in Alabama*

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INTRODUCTION

CAMPING has occupied a dual position in the history of the human race. Originally all of mankind were primitive campers. With increases in building skills and permanent settlements, most persons moved into fixed housing units. Camping became associated with nomadic herdsmen and persons without enough resources to dwell in more stable situations.

In many areas of the world people presently live in temporary structures and cook their meals outdoors. In these areas camping is a way of life. In developed areas of the world camping has become a form of outdoor recreation.

Camping serves two purposes in developed countries. First, camping allows individuals an opportunity to leave their work and home environment and return to a close relationship with nature. Secondly, camping allows families to minimize housing and food costs while engaging in vacation activities. There is much evidence that the second reason accounts for a majority of camping activities. One observer of campgrounds all over the United States maintains that campgrounds have turned into "treeless, transplanted suburbias that utterly insulate the camper from the environment." (4)

A study of camping areas in Alabama was needed before statements regarding the feasibility of campgrounds could be made. Objectives of this camping study were to determine fea-

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tures of campgrounds in Alabama associated with profitable operation and to set forth factors to consider in development of a campground. This analysis should aid private and governmental planners in evaluating the feasibility of campground construction.

METHOD OF STUDY

Individual camping demand was taken from data compiled in the *1970 Alabama Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*. (2) The supply of Alabama campsites was taken from the same source.

Thirty campground operators were interviewed during 1970 to ascertain factors they considered important in establishment of a campground. Only the larger and more popular campgrounds were included in the survey. However, a total of 35 campgrounds was designated by a 1969 camping directory as having the best developed facilities for camping in Alabama. (5) Thus the survey was not an unbiased sampling of available facilities, but was more indicative of economic potential. The location of the campgrounds included in the study is shown in Figure 1. An inventory of activities, facilities, and layouts was made to determine desirable design features and locations.

Campground operators who were interviewed were most cordial and helpful. Five of the 35 campground operations were excluded from the survey. Of the five excluded, the State of Alabama had cancelled concession arrangements and discontinued camping at one recreation area; one location which was designated by the camping directory as having only four sites was excluded from the survey list; operators of two campgrounds could not be contacted because of insufficient information regarding name, location, or operating season; and one was closed because of mercury pollution in an adjacent fishing area. Additionally, not all information was obtainable on each campground. Therefore, in the analysis of data, the number of campgrounds represented in various questions differed. In most instances information was available on 27 or 28 of the 35 campgrounds.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CAMPGROUNDS AND OPERATORS

Locational features, certain operator characteristics, and campground characteristics leading to successful campground operation were ascertained by interviewing operators.

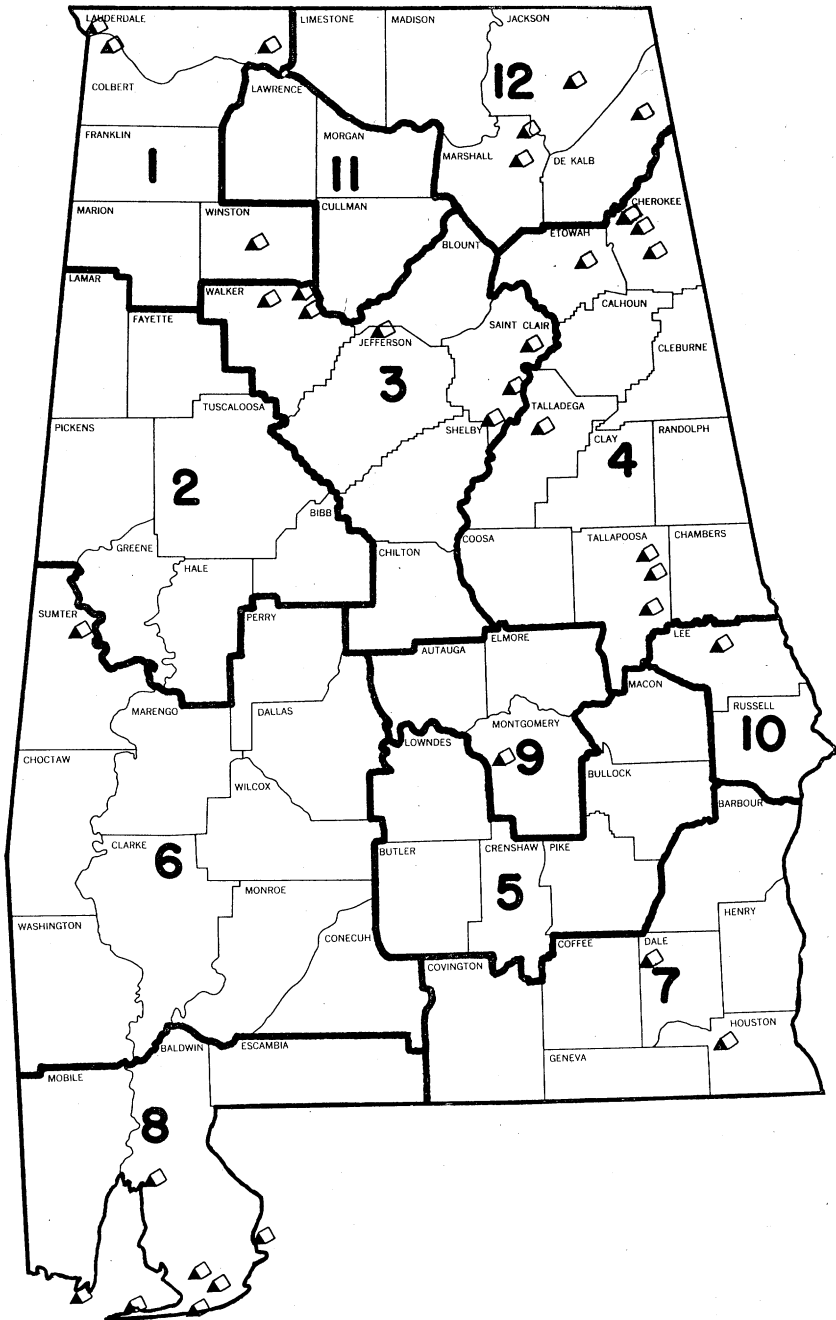


FIG. 1. Map of Alabama's official planning districts showing location of campgrounds in judgment sample.

Locational Features

In order to attract an adequate number of campers, owners located campgrounds near highways or attractions of some type. An analysis of data provided by campground operators supported the hypothesis. Only five campgrounds were not located adjacent to two or more of the location features mentioned. Seventy-five per cent of the campgrounds were located on water, 57 per cent had direct access to a U.S. highway, and 28 per cent were adjacent to an interstate highway. Of campgrounds not adjacent to an interstate or U.S. highway, six were within 6 to 10 miles of a major highway, two were within 11 to 15 miles, and only one was over 20 miles from a main thoroughfare.

<i>Location adjacent to</i>	<i>Number of campgrounds</i>
U.S. highway.....	16
Lake	13
Historic, scenic or special attraction.....	10
Interstate highway.....	8
State highway.....	8
Beach, bay, or gulf.....	6
Stream.....	3
Country road.....	1

Campgrounds were located an average of 36 miles from a city of 50,000 or more residents. Twenty-six of 31 campgrounds were within 51 miles of a city of 50,000 population.

Activities and Facilities

Campground operators placed additional emphasis upon activities and facilities at campgrounds to attract campers and increase length of stay, Table 1. Three locations had no facilities for any kind of recreational activity except camping. However, only one location reported no additional activities. The other two campgrounds were adjacent to water, but provided no developed facilities for guests.

A country store or a concession stand was available in 24 of 28 campgrounds and for one campground both were available. Washing machines and dryers were also available at 4 of 5 campgrounds.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF CAMPGROUNDS OUT OF 30 REPORTING RECREATIONAL FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES AVAILABLE BY FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES, ALABAMA, 1970

Facility	Campgrounds	Activity	Campgrounds
	No.		No.
Barbecue pits.....	19	Swimming.....	23
Fishing.....	18	Fishing.....	22
Playground equipment.....	13	Boating and skiing.....	15
Picnic shelters.....	10	Hiking.....	8
Swimming pool.....	8	Campfire programs.....	6
Boat rental.....	8	Chapel services.....	4
Hiking trails.....	7	Sight-seeing (on-site).....	3
Recreation hall.....	3	Horseback riding.....	2
Chapel.....	2	Dancing.....	2
Miniature golf.....	2	Pin-ball machines.....	2
Amphitheater.....	2	Movies.....	1
Boat storage.....	1	Canoeing.....	1
		Sailing.....	1
		Hay rides.....	1
		Pool.....	1
		Horseshoes.....	1
		Ping-pong.....	1

Advertising

Fourteen different advertising media were used by 28 campground operators, yet half of the managers agreed that word-of-mouth was the best means of advertisement, Table 2.

Although 22 campground operators relied on word-of-mouth advertisement, operators stressed that word-of-mouth advertisement could be harmful as well as complimentary. The camper population was rather close-knit and campsite neighbors tended to discuss other campground accommodations.

Camper guides were the second most widely used advertising medium partly because such advertisement was free. Guide publishers did not charge for a listing of a location giving the name, address, and facilities available at the campground.

Sixteen operators used roadside signs in advertising; however, only two operators felt signs were the best advertisement. Twenty-three of 28 campgrounds were advertised by roadside signs, camper guides, or both.

Only 4 of 28 operators relied totally upon word-of-mouth as a means of advertisement. Two of the four operators stated that they had discontinued advertising since they had been unable to meet the resultant demand. One campground was still under development and not ready for advertisement. Seven operators felt a combination of two media was best for business.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF CAMPGROUND OPERATORS ADVERTISING AND NUMBER NAMING A BEST METHOD, BY METHOD OF ADVERTISEMENT, ALABAMA, 1970

Method of advertisement	Operators who used advertisement	Operators who considered it best advertisement
	No.	No.
Word-of-mouth.....	22	14
Camper guides.....	21	9
Roadside signs.....	16	2
Brochures.....	10	1
Letters and cards.....	8	0
Magazines.....	6	0
Roadmaps.....	6	2
Maps of campground.....	6	0
Radio and TV.....	5	2
Newspapers.....	4	0
Bumper stickers.....	3	0
Franchise advertising.....	2	1
State and nat'l camper assoc.....	1	1
Out-of-state guests get one free night's stay.....	1	1

Charges for Camping

Advertised rates at campgrounds ranged from no charge at one location with no developed sites to a high of \$4.00 per night at two locations. Advertised rates and average rates received per campsite varied because 16 of 26 campgrounds charged additionally for some conveniences and activities.

Only one owner was able to specify the average fee received per campsite. Although the advertised rate was \$2.75 per night, additional fees received per campsite raised the total rate to \$3.75.

Advertised rates were generally higher on the Gulf Coast than in other planning districts, Figure 1. Rates in the South Alabama Regional Planning District (district 8) were compared with rates in the rest of the State, Table 3. A single campground

TABLE 3. RANGE OF ADVERTISED CAMPING RATES PER DAY AND AVERAGE ADVERTISED RATES BY DISTRICTS, ALABAMA, 1970

Planning districts	Range of advertised rates	Average rates advertised	Those with extra charges	Total reporting
	Dol.	Dol.	No.	No.
8.....	\$1.50-4.00	\$3.00	6	6
1, 11, 12.....	2.00-3.00	2.50	5	7
Rest of State.....	1.50-3.00	2.42	4	13

which did not charge for overnight camping was eliminated so the average advertised rate would not be biased downward.

Campsites equipped with water, electrical outlets, and toilet facilities were considered developed. Campsites without such facilities were classified as undeveloped or primitive. Campgrounds in district 8 were no more highly developed than campgrounds in other districts, nor were additional facilities or activities provided. A possible explanation for higher advertised rates was greater demand for camping space in district 8.

Maintenance

Three campground owners stated that very little time and effort were involved in operating and maintaining a campground. Seventeen owners stated the campground required their full attention for 8 to 14 hours per day.

While maintenance required at least one full-time employee, owners reported no specific problems in day-to-day operations. Nine operators said they had no problems of significance.

The most frequently mentioned problem as stated by 20 per cent of the owners was garbage disposal. Garbage was collected at each site an average of five times a week with a range of two times to "as many times as needed." Fifteen of 24 owners collected garbage at least seven times a week. Waste from 16 campgrounds was taken to city dumps. One owner paid a private firm to collect garbage and five others either burned their garbage or used a land-fill dump. Only one operator related garbage to pollution. The owner had once burned trash in an incinerator, but changed the practice to help stop air pollution.

Campground Regulations

Most owners established various rules and regulations for campers. Only 2 of 28 campgrounds reported no camper regulations. No operators reported any particular problems in areas with rules or in enforcement of rules. Several owners did state that violation of noise restrictions and pet rules resulted in expulsion from the campground.

<i>Type of rules</i>	<i>Number of campgrounds using rule</i>
Noise restrictions.....	18
Speed regulations.....	16
Pets on leash only.....	15
Gate closing rules (closed at X hr.).....	11
No alcoholic beverages.....	10
Entering and leaving rules.....	9
Garbage rules.....	7
Swimming rules.....	3
No pets.....	2
Other.....	6

Site Characteristics

A large difference in number of sites per acre was found to exist between areas of over 100 sites and smaller campgrounds, Table 4. Areas of over 100 sites contained more than three times as many sites per acre as smaller campgrounds. This led to the supposition that Alabama's camping facilities could be expanded to some extent without adding additional land resources. Some campground operators either could not or did not distinguish

TABLE 4. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF CAMPGROUNDS AND CAMPGROUND OPERATORS BY NUMBER OF CAMPSITES IN CAMPGROUND, ALABAMA, 1970

Types of characteristics	Number of campsites in campground			
	1-33	34-67	68-100	Over 100 ¹
Number of campgrounds reporting.....	6	7	5	10
	Av.	Av.	Av.	Av.
Age of operator, years.....	50.2	44.8	55.4	47.4
Education of operator, years.....	13.8	14.0	10.3	9.8
Sites in campground.....	21.8	49.3	86.3	175.8
Developed sites.....	16.9	45.0	86.3	126.9
Percentage of sites developed.....	74.1	91.3	100.0	72.2
Number of acres.....	8.9	20.1	42.3	23.4
Sites per acre.....	2.5	2.5	2.0	7.5
Years in operation.....	4.0	4.1 ²	4.7	4.2
Facilities available ³	2.8	4.1	4.0	2.7
Activities at sites ⁴	2.5	3.6	3.5	3.4
Flush toilets (in campground).....	4.8	5.3	5.8	5.6
Hot showers.....	4.2	7.7	4.5	3.5
Water outlets.....	17.8	67.0 ³	64.3 ⁴	121.9
Electrical outlets.....	19.2	82.0 ⁵	85.7	130.3
Lavatories.....	3.3	4.8	4.2	4.8
Length of visitor stay, days.....	2.7	1.9	2.3	2.8

¹ Wind Creek State park information was excluded from all data so averages would not be distorted.

² Average does not include one park which was in operation 24 years.

³ Average does not include one park which contained 240 water outlets.

⁴ Average does not include one park which contained no water outlets.

⁵ Average does not include one park which contained 240 electrical outlets.

⁶ Refer to Table 1 for description of facilities and activities.

between total acreage available and acreage included in campground.

Additional support for the argument that large camp-parks were developed by adding more sites to a constant acreage was found when facilities and activities were examined. Campgrounds containing more than 100 sites were equipped with fewer facilities than other campgrounds although the number of activities at the locations was comparable. Despite an increased number of sites, there was no increase in number of flush toilets, hot showers, or lavatories.

Guests camped an average of 2.4 nights at all campgrounds studied, with length of stay ranging from 1.0 to 7.0 nights. Five owners reported most campers stayed only one night. One campground operator reported that his area could operate at a profit only if guests stayed at least an average of 1.5 nights. Four of the five campground areas contained fewer than 68 sites and one contained over 100 sites. Possible exceptions to the need for campers staying more than one night were campgrounds which operated on a volume basis. An area that emptied and refilled each day was not dependent upon long-term visitors.

Forty-two per cent of the campground owners said campground operation was their main occupation; however, only 30 per cent of campground owners with over 100 sites claimed that campground operation was their main source of income, Table 5. Two of 27 owners had retired from other occupations.

TABLE 5. NUMBER OF OPERATORS RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS REGARDING CAMPGROUND MANAGEMENT BY NUMBER OF SITES IN CAMPGROUND, ALABAMA, 1970

Questions		Number of sites in campground				Total
		1-33	34-67	68-100	Over 100	
Is campground main occupation?	Yes	2	4	3	3	12
	No	3	4	2	7	16
Are thoroughfares paved?	Yes	2	1	2	1	6
	No	4	6	3	9	22
Is expansion or modernization planned?	Yes	4	4	3	9	20
	No	2	3	1	1	7
Is it a dumping station?	Yes	2	6	2	8	18
	No	4	1	2	2	9
Do you have liability insurance?	Yes	2	6	3	9	20
	No	2	1	2	1	6
Is operator retired person?	Yes	0	1	0	1	2
	No	6	6	4	9	25
Is assistance or advice received in development?	Yes	1	5	4	3	13
	No	5	2	1	5	13

Only 6 of 28 campgrounds had paved thoroughfares. Streets were not paved, especially in district 8, to eliminate as much heat as possible and to avoid high fixed capital investment or development costs and associated annual fixed costs.

Operation Problems

Twenty of 27 owners reported they planned expansion or modernization of campgrounds. This offered support for the contention that demand for camping facilities was increasing.

Fifty per cent of the owners received some advice or assistance in development of their campgrounds, yet 61 per cent of the owners reported changes that would be made if redevelopment were possible. The problem most frequently stated involved electrical wiring and outlets. The original wiring was not adequate to support the number of appliances campers were using. Seven owners reported replacing original wiring or adding more outlets. Four owners stated that they would start operations again with more sites. No owner took advantage of recreational loans which were available through the Farmers Home Administration, yet the majority of different changes desired resulted from limited investment capital.

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CAMPGROUND

In interviews with campground operators, an attempt was made to specify costs of campground construction. However, few owners were precise about costs of construction because much of the cost involved their own time and energy. Many operators used their own equipment in leveling campsites. Land values varied widely and many estimates were given on the basis of "best offer received."

According to the U.S. Forest Service, a small campground of 10 units should not cost more than \$6,000 to \$7,000 including roads and signs. Additional camp units, if provided in expansion plans, could be added at a cost of about \$400 to \$500 each. (3) However, the campground operators interviewed indicated higher costs for building campsites.

One Alabama campground owner specified total construction costs, including purchase of 12 acres of land, for 60 developed sites to be \$85,000 or \$1,416 per campsite. However, the owner

estimated an additional 60 sites would cost \$35,000. Total cost per site would be reduced to \$1,000.

Estimates of other operators ranged as low as \$100 per campsite. Generalizations and lack of information received made many estimates of construction costs meaningless. Therefore, only general considerations that should be made in campground development are described below.

General Considerations

Every retail business must have a "flow" of customers generated by marketing of a product or service desired by consumers. Although campgrounds market a desired service, campgrounds usually do not have the drawing power needed to attract customers into an area. Camping accepts the role of an intermediate service. It, in most instances, is used as a means to reduce expenditures while campers enjoy additional activities. Therefore, location of the campground is of primary concern for each owner.

Several locational features attract a large volume of recreationists of whom a small proportion are campers. Well-traveled U.S. highways and interstate highways present camp-park owners an opportunity to attract transitory guests.

Population centers, bodies of water, and scenic and historical sites tend to attract longer term guests who use campgrounds for temporary lodging while engaging in other recreational activities. Campground owners need to determine features that will favorably affect their volume of business before establishing a location.

Additional considerations arise in the form of initial costs of land purchased and construction costs. Each owner needs to consider not only location of the property, but also topographical features and opportunity costs. If a higher return can be earned with the employment of resources elsewhere, the owner should weigh the enjoyment of owning a campground against the additional income that can be earned. A high initial investment in campground development reduces the flexibility of resources employed. A developed campground with plumbing and wiring can be used for little else.

Site Considerations

Topography is important in the development stages of parks. Sites laid out on hilly or rough terrain have to be leveled at great

expense while sites in low-lying areas need dirt or clay fills. Many operators can reduce expenses by doing the work themselves with their own equipment. Because of high land costs, layout designs of sites are needed to make the best utilization of available acreage.

Sites need to be designed not only to take advantage of available land, but with the ease of access and enjoyment of campers in mind. Sites permitting easy entry and exit are generally recommended by park owners, Figure 2. Many camp-trailer owners are unable to back trailers into sites and pull-through sites need to be utilized. Additionally, disturbance of other campers is held to a minimum with pull-through sites.

Developed sites provide campers with water, electrical and sometimes sewage hookups. Two water outlets at each site provide running water inside and outside camping units. Some new self-contained units operate air conditioners on a 110-volt circuit. Few parks in Alabama were equipped with the necessary wiring or outlets for these appliances. Preferably, each site should be equipped with two or more 110-volt outlets — one for circuits inside the camper and one for outdoor activities.

Septic fields have to be developed for a bathhouse containing flush toilets, lavatories and hot showers. A dumping station for units equipped to hold a minimum amount of sewage can also empty into the septic field. Hookups can be provided at some sites to allow campers to empty sewage directly into campground septic tanks. Health department regulations are not uniform and a prospective campground operator should contact local health department personnel regarding regulations in his

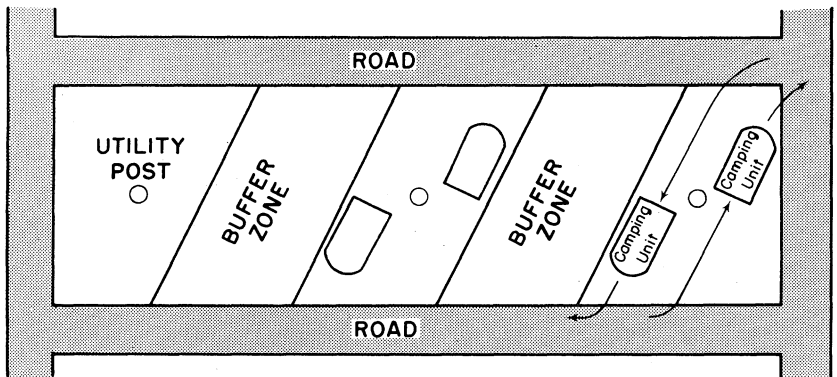


FIG. 2. Pull-through campsites.

area. One operator reported the health department in his county had no set regulations governing septic tank installations.

Facilities provided in addition to those described for a developed site vary for each campground. Serious consideration needs to be given to operation of a store, concession stand, washing machines, picnic tables or other facilities to provide additional income.

Operation Considerations

After campground development, maintenance and labor costs vary for each location. Full-time employment of at least one person is usually required by most campgrounds. Daily maintenance includes picking up litter, garbage collection, and cleaning of bathhouses. An employee should be available at most times to collect camping fees and answer questions and complaints.

Advertising expenses vary greatly depending upon the media used. Camper guides are widely used because they are read by most experienced campers. Favorable word-of-mouth advertisement is generated by not only the general condition of facilities, but also by an atmosphere created by operators through personality traits.

Liability insurance rates are not uniform because of the wide range of facilities at campgrounds. Boat docks and swimming facilities increase rates more than activities such as fishing and playgrounds.

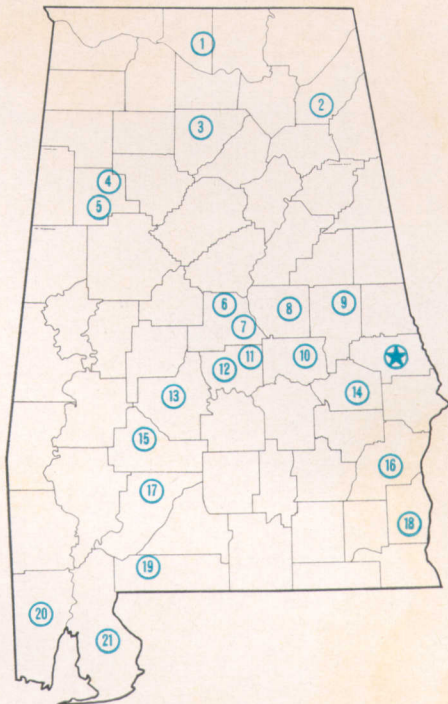
Two factors of utmost importance are locational features and high investment costs in site development. An owner of a poorly located campground cannot expect a large volume of business. Potential investors need to evaluate all costs and factors of development before committing resources. Limited capital resources may abbreviate expansion plans of many operators.

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Research Unit Identification

★ Main Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn.

1. Tennessee Valley Substation, Belle Mina.
2. Sand Mountain Substation, Crossville.
3. North Alabama Horticulture Substation, Cullman.
4. Upper Coastal Plain Substation, Winfield.
5. Forestry Unit, Fayette County.
6. Thorsby Foundation Seed Stocks Farm, Thorsby.
7. Chilton Area Horticulture Substation, Clanton.
8. Forestry Unit, Coosa County.
9. Piedmont Substation, Camp Hill.
10. Plant Breeding Unit, Tallassee.
11. Forestry Unit, Autauga County.
12. Prattville Experiment Field, Prattville.
13. Black Belt Substation, Marion Junction.
14. Tuskegee Experiment Field, Tuskegee.
15. Lower Coastal Plain Substation, Camden.
16. Forestry Unit, Barbour County.
17. Monroeville Experiment Field, Monroeville.
18. Wiregrass Substation, Headland.
19. Brewton Experiment Field, Brewton.
20. Ornamental Horticulture Field Station, Spring Hill.
21. Gulf Coast Substation, Fairhope.