

Dragon Closing Hurts Businesses June 1, 2010

Blount County's businesses are feeling the effects of the ongoing closure of "The Dragon," U.S. 129 after a March rockslide.

County officials don't have firm numbers to illustrate any drop in sales tax revenues because of the closure, but Jody Montgomery, spokesman for the Punkin Motorcycle Resort and related store, 7304 Old Railroad Bed Road, said businesses that depend on Dragon-related tourism are hurting.

"It ain't doing good," Montgomery said. "I'd say the businesses are down 90 percent. We're sitting in a boat with a hole shot in it."

Herb Handy, executive vice president for tourism of Smoky Mountains Convention and Visitors Bureau, doesn't have hard data on any drop, but he said the closure is obviously hurting local businesses.

"We know that The Dragon is very popular destination for our motorcycle people. Not only our motorcycle people, but lot of the car clubs will drive the dragon as well. We have of course a considerable amount of people who stay in Townsend with plans of going over and riding the Dragon."

Meanwhile, recovery efforts at the site of the rockslide continue. Several hundred tons of material is being hauled away as crews continue to work to repair and stabilize the mountainside above the site. More than 11,000 tons of rock has been removed from the unstable slope using three trim blasts and scaling. This week, crews have hauled away more than 55 truckloads of material.

TDOT has created a web page for information on the rockslide, detours, pictures and video which can be found at www.tdot.state.tn.us/US129rockslide/default.htm. To view rockslide repair work on U.S. 129/State Route 115 you can go to <http://www.earthcam.com/clients/tennessseedot>. You can also view our latest trim blast at www.youtube.com/user/TDOTnews.

Detours remain in place while crews continue with the rock slide repairs. The Dragon remains closed from just past the Foothills Parkway to the Tabcat Bridge. However, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. U.S. 129/SR-115 is open from Tabcat Bridge to the state line. Through traffic is not allowed to travel through the slide area at anytime.

The completion date for the project remains July 31 with a \$195,000 incentive for early completion by July 1.

TDOT has created a web page for information on the rock slide which can be found at www.tn.gov/tdot by clicking on the link "Rockslide Closures" at the top of the page.



In this recent photo, Lewis Clarke takes notes about recovery efforts under way at the site of a rockslide that has closed The Dragon on U.S. 129 in Blount County.