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For immediate release – Aug. 3, 2004

## **Welcome center introduces wireless Internet service**

**TAVARES** – Long known for its appeal to hikers, bird-watchers and water-sport enthusiasts, Lake County is now attracting another large niche of the population: Internet users.

“I think there is sort of a techie, non-techie generational gap here and those people that are on the technological edge will know what it means and effectively use the wireless Internet service,” said Greg Mihalic, Lake County Economic Development and Tourism Department director. “I think it is certainly something that is on the technological cutting edge.”

While the Lake County Welcome Center features free beverages and a wealth of information about happenings and tourist destinations in the County, the center recently added the ability for visitors and local residents to access a high-speed, wireless Internet connection (Wi-Fi).

“Free orange juice, free coffee and now free Wi-Fi,” Mihalic said.

The installation of the Wi-Fi unit was completed at the beginning of August at the Lake County Welcome Center, located at 20763 U.S. Highway 27, about five miles north of Minneola, just beyond the State Road 19 intersection. The Wi-Fi system at the welcome center can be accessed in the parking lot or building, and most laptops or personal digital assistants (PDA) manufactured after 2002 have a wireless card built in, said Steve Earls, Lake County Information Technology Department director.

“There is really no configuration that has to take place, if you just set your laptop or PDA to look for an available Wi-Fi connection it should find it and you’re online,” Earls said.

With several billboards on the Florida Turnpike to advertise the new feature at the welcome center, hopes are the Wi-Fi service will boost sagging visitor turnout at the Lake County tourist information stop. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., the number of visitors to the Lake County Welcome Center has been decreasing for about five years, Mihalic said.

“Just by the nature of people doing their planning and traveling they are not stopping at welcome centers anymore they do it on the Internet,” he said. “It will be interesting to see how much it adds. Obviously, if we spread the word and people think it’s something they can use, hopefully they will stop in and use it.”

While visitation at the welcome center has declined slightly, overall interest in the Lake County Economic Development and Tourism Department is at an all-time high. More than 400,000 Internet hits are registered on the department Web site ([www.lakecountyfl.com](http://www.lakecountyfl.com)) each month and newly published resource guides are making important tourist information more readily available for Lake County residents and visitors.

“We have a lot broader services than we have in the past,” Mihalic said.

Lake County officials believe the benefit of adding Wi-Fi access to the welcome center will be positive as plans are also in the works to add wireless Internet service to other county buildings located in the city of Tavares.

“For so long we had the television monitors tuned into the news, but they always weren’t tuned into the right channel, and this way people can go out to CNN, CBS or whatever to pick up the news,” Earls said. “We often have a lot of citizens in at 9 o’clock in the morning for business meetings or for board meetings and they don’t come up on the agenda until 11:30, so they’ve sat there for two and a half hours and couldn’t do anything. This way they can stay in touch with their e-mail or continue to work by pulling files off the Internet.”

To learn more about the Lake County Welcome Center Wi-Fi service, call 352-429-4265 or 800-430-LAKE (5253).

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