RV PARK

2026

55 PAGES

Operators Bible

The Complete Guide to Buying, Building, and Running a Profitable RV Park or Campground

Prepared For :

RV PARK OWNERS & OPERATORS

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THE RV PARK OPERATOR'S BIBLE

The Complete Guide to Buying, Building, and Running a Profitable RV Park or Campground

FOR INVESTORS • OWNERS • OPERATORS • MANAGERS

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Published under the 5Star Camp brand by 6Star Tech, LLC, Missouri.

DISCLAIMER: This book is for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute legal, tax, financial, engineering, or investment advice. RV park regulations vary significantly by state, county, and municipality. Always consult a licensed attorney, CPA, and qualified engineer or environmental consultant before making decisions about land, water, septic, or financing. The author has operated and managed RV parks directly, and the strategies described reflect real operating experience, but no outcome is guaranteed.

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Introduction: Why This Book Exists

Most of what's written about the RV park and campground industry falls into one of two buckets: glossy investment pitches that make it sound like a passive cash machine, or generic hospitality advice copy-pasted from the hotel world that ignores everything that makes a park different from a hotel.

Neither of those is true to the job. A park is a small utility company, a property management company, a hospitality business, a maintenance department, and sometimes a small-claims-court defendant, all running at once, often with a staff of three.

This book was written from the ground floor of an actual, operating RV park — not from a spreadsheet, and not from a franchise manual. Every chapter exists because something in it either made money, lost money, or nearly caused a lawsuit at a real property. Where the industry's polished version of a topic and the on-the-ground reality disagree, this book sides with reality.

Who This Book Is For

- Investors evaluating a park acquisition or ground-up development and trying to separate real risk from sales-pitch risk.
- New owners who just closed on a park and are realizing the seller's binder did not cover what actually keeps the lights on.
- General managers and on-site operators who inherited a property and need an operating playbook, not just a job description.
- Multi-park operators and REIT-style consolidators standardizing procedures across properties.
- Anyone studying the campground industry from the outside who wants to understand what actually drives profitability, risk, and guest experience in this niche of hospitality real estate.

How to Use This Book

The book is organized in the order most operators actually move through the business: evaluating and acquiring, building or improving, running day-to-day operations, managing the money, marketing the property, managing legal risk, and finally scaling or exiting. Part 7, “What Nobody Tells You,” is deliberately placed after the fundamentals because none of it makes sense without them — it is the chapter every experienced operator wishes someone had handed them on day one. Part 8 translates everything into region-specific playbooks, and Part 9 covers the technology and systems layer that ties daily operations together.

> **HOW TO READ THIS:** Each chapter stands on its own. If you already own a park and are drowning in daily operations, skip straight to Part 3. If you're still deciding whether to buy one, start at Part 1 and read straight through Part 7.

About 5Star Camp

5Star Camp is built by an active RV park operator, not a software company that decided campgrounds looked like an interesting market. The guest experience tools, the operating frameworks, and the lessons in this book all came out of running a real property, day to day, including the parts that never make it into a polished case study.

This book is the written companion to that same philosophy: give operators the unglamorous, specific, operationally-grounded knowledge that actually determines whether a park makes money — not the version of the industry that looks good in a pitch deck.

For tools built specifically around the workflows described throughout this book — guest information and communication, maintenance tracking, and the kind of operational visibility a small staff needs to run a property well — visit 5star.camp.

A Note on How This Book Was Built

Every recommendation in this book was tested against one standard: would this actually help someone running a real park tomorrow morning, not just sound right in a meeting. Where the polished industry narrative and the operating reality disagreed, this book sided with reality, even when that meant including the unflattering parts — the failed septic system, the abandoned RV, the season that ran cash-negative because nobody modeled the trough correctly. Those are the chapters that matter most.

Part 1: Before You Buy

Buying an RV park is not buying a hotel, and it is not buying an apartment complex, even though brokers will pitch it as a hybrid of both. It is buying a small piece of utility infrastructure with a hospitality business layered on top. The due diligence list below is longer than what most brokers volunteer — deliberately.

1.1 Defining What You're Actually Buying

Before you analyze a single number, classify the property. The three categories below behave like different asset classes even when the listing photos look similar:

- Destination/Resort Park — high amenity count, strong seasonal swings, revenue heavily weighted toward nightly and weekly transient guests, marketing-dependent.
- Transient/Highway Park — located near interstates or attractions, overnight-heavy, low amenity, high turnover, strongly affected by fuel prices and road trip trends.
- Long-Term/Residential Park — majority of lots rented monthly or longer to semi-permanent residents, behaves financially and legally much closer to a manufactured housing community than a campground.

> **WHY THIS MATTERS:** A park that's 70% long-term residents is subject to landlord-tenant law, eviction timelines, and notice periods in a way a 90% transient resort park is not. Buying a 'campground' that is legally closer to a mobile home park changes your entire risk and exit profile.

1.2 Site Selection Fundamentals

If you're buying raw land for ground-up development rather than an existing park, site selection mistakes are nearly impossible to undo after the fact. Evaluate every parcel against:

- Drive-time radius to the nearest interstate exit or major highway (under 15 minutes is ideal for transient traffic).
- Proximity to a demand driver: a lake, national/state park, ski resort, beach, theme park, or event venue. Parks with no nearby demand driver depend entirely on highway pass-through traffic.
- Floodplain status — pull FEMA flood maps before anything else. A site in a 100-year floodplain affects insurance cost, financing, and buildability of permanent structures.
- Topography and drainage — flat land sounds ideal but often drains poorly; gentle slope with engineered drainage usually outperforms it long term.
- Soil type and percolation rate — directly determines septic feasibility and cost if no municipal sewer is available.
- Existing utility capacity at the road — electrical service size, water main size, and whether the local utility can actually deliver the amperage a full build-out will need.

- Noise sources — rail lines, highways, airports, and industrial neighbors that won't show up on a satellite photo tour.
- Local government attitude toward campgrounds — some counties actively want the tax base and tourism dollars; others treat campgrounds as a nuisance use and will slow-walk every permit.

1.3 Due Diligence Checklist for an Existing Park

This is the list most buyers don't get from their broker. Treat every item as a deal point, not a formality.

Physical & Infrastructure

- Septic system: get the system mapped, pumped, and inspected by a licensed septic contractor — not just 'looked at.' Ask for the design capacity in gallons per day and compare it to actual occupied-lot count.
- Well water systems: request water quality test results for bacteria, nitrates, and (if applicable) arsenic or radon, plus well permit and capacity documentation.
- Electrical infrastructure: confirm amperage mix (30/50 amp split), pedestal age and condition, and whether the park's transformer capacity supports full occupancy without brownouts.
- Road and pad condition: gravel vs. paved, drainage at each pad, and realistic resurfacing timeline and cost.
- Sewer hookups: lateral condition at each site if connected to municipal sewer; age and material of pipe (clay tile failures are common in older parks).
- Pool, playground, and other amenities: ask for the most recent health department inspection on the pool and confirm playground equipment meets current CPSC safety standards.
- Internet/Wi-Fi infrastructure: bandwidth capacity relative to occupancy — weak Wi-Fi is one of the most common 1-star review triggers in this industry.

Financial

- Trailing 36 months of profit and loss statements, not just trailing 12 — seasonality and one-time events distort a single year.
- Lot-by-lot rent roll showing rate, term (nightly/weekly/monthly/annual), and tenure of every current occupant.
- Utility reimbursement structure — are long-term tenants billed back for actual usage, or is utility cost absorbed in a flat lot rent? This materially changes true NOI.
- Capital expenditure history for the last 5 years and a written list of deferred maintenance.
- Existing OTA/booking platform contracts and their commission structures — these often auto-renew and can be expensive to exit.

Legal & Regulatory

- Zoning verification letter from the county confirming the current use is legally conforming, not just historically tolerated.
- Copies of every operating permit: health department, food service (if a store/restaurant exists), pool, well, septic/sewer discharge.
- Any pending code violations, citations, or open complaints on file with the county or state.
- Existing tenant leases or rental agreements, especially long-term residents — review notice periods and any rent-control-adjacent local ordinances.
- Title search for easements, mineral rights, and floodway dedications that could restrict future development.
- Environmental Phase I assessment, particularly for parks that were previously agricultural, industrial, or near old fuel storage.

1.4 Market & Demand Analysis

Don't take the seller's occupancy claims at face value. Build your own model:

1. Pull comparable parks within a realistic drive radius and compare nightly, weekly, and monthly rates.
2. Check the same comp set's online reviews for recurring complaints — these reveal unmet demand you could capture.
3. Estimate seasonality by region: a park in the Ozarks or the Gulf Coast has a very different demand curve than one in Arizona's snowbird corridor.
4. Cross-reference local tourism board visitor data and any nearby event calendars (festivals, fishing tournaments, races) that drive surge demand.
5. Identify the local long-term-stay demand driver, if any — traveling workforce (pipeline, storm restoration, construction), which can substantially de-risk off-season cash flow.

1.5 Valuation & Deal Structure

Method	How It Works	Best Used For
Cap Rate / NOI	Purchase price ÷ Net Operating Income; or NOI ÷ market cap rate to back into value	Stabilized parks with 2+ years of clean financials
Per-Site Value	Comparable sale price divided by number of sites	Quick sanity check against regional comps
Replacement Cost	Cost to build an equivalent park today minus depreciation	Distressed or undervalued parks, raw land development

Method	How It Works	Best Used For
Income Approach (DCF)	Discounted cash flow projection over a hold period	Value-add deals with planned rate or occupancy growth

Cap rates for RV parks have historically run higher than multifamily or hotel cap rates to compensate for smaller deal size, less institutional financing, and operational intensity — always confirm current cap rate ranges with a commercial broker active in the campground/RV resort niche, since they move with interest rates.

WATCH FOR: Sellers frequently report NOI before deducting a market-rate management cost, because they manage it themselves for free. Always reunderwrite NOI assuming you'll need to pay for a manager, even if you plan to live on-site initially.

1.6 Financing Options

- SBA 7(a) or 504 loans — commonly used for owner-operated parks; requires the buyer to actively manage rather than passively hold.
- Conventional commercial real estate loans through regional and community banks who understand hospitality/RV assets — large national banks often don't have an underwriting box for this asset class.
- USDA Rural Development loans — viable for parks in qualifying rural areas, sometimes overlooked.
- Seller financing — common in this industry because many sellers are retiring owner-operators; can bridge gaps when a property doesn't fit clean SBA or bank underwriting.
- Private/hard money bridge loans — useful for distressed parks needing fast close and a renovation period before refinancing into permanent debt.

1.7 Purchase Agreement Pitfalls

- Personal property and equipment list: mowers, golf carts, maintenance tools, and office equipment must be itemized in the contract — sellers routinely strip these before closing if not explicitly listed.
- Reservation and deposit liability: confirm who is financially responsible for honoring existing future reservations and deposits taken before closing.
- Domain, website, and review platform accounts: get explicit transfer language for the website domain, Google Business Profile, and OTA accounts — losing access to these post-closing can erase years of review history and search ranking.
- Holdback escrow for known deferred maintenance items identified in due diligence.
- Non-compete clause preventing the seller from opening a competing park within a defined radius and timeframe.

- Employee transition: clarify which staff are expected to stay, and get any at-will employment status confirmed in writing to avoid inheriting undisclosed obligations.

1.8 Environmental Due Diligence Beyond the Phase I

A standard Phase I environmental assessment is a starting point, not a complete answer, for RV park sites in particular.

- Underground storage tanks: many older parks have legacy fuel tanks from a long-closed gas station, generator fuel supply, or maintenance shop — confirm none exist undocumented, since cleanup liability can attach to the current owner regardless of who caused the contamination.
- Wetland delineation: if any portion of the property is near a creek, pond, or low-lying area, a wetlands determination protects you from later discovering you can't expand or rebuild in that zone without a federal permit.
- Floodway vs. floodplain distinction: a floodway (the channel that must remain clear for flood flow) often prohibits new structures entirely, while a floodplain simply requires different insurance and construction standards — confirm which applies to which parts of your site.
- Tree health and hazard assessment: mature shade trees are a major selling point for a park's character, but legacy trees near sites and structures should be assessed by an arborist for disease and storm-failure risk before you inherit the liability.

1.9 Traffic & Access Engineering

- Confirm turning radius at the entrance accommodates the largest rigs you intend to market to — a tight entrance turn quietly excludes your most profitable big-rig segment without ever showing up as a complaint, because those guests simply never book.
- Sight-line distance at the entrance onto the public road matters for both guest safety and your liability exposure if a collision occurs at a poorly-sighted entrance.
- If a state or county road project is planned nearby, investigate it before closing — a new highway bypass can quietly redirect the transient traffic an entire highway-stop park depends on.

1.10 Insurance Transition at Closing

- Never let your new policy's effective date have any gap with the seller's policy lapsing — even a one-day gap leaves the property uninsured during a transition that often includes contractors, new staff, and unfamiliar systems.
- Request the seller's loss history report (claims filed in recent years) as part of due diligence — a pattern of liability claims (slip-and-falls, pool incidents) reveals operational risk the financials alone won't show, and will affect your own premium quote.

- Get your own insurance quotes during the due diligence period, not after signing — a property with septic, flood, or older electrical issues can produce a premium high enough to change your underwriting entirely.

Part 2: Setting Up for Success

Whether you're developing raw land or repositioning an existing park, the decisions in this section are the ones that are expensive or impossible to reverse later. Get the bones right before you get the curb appeal right.

2.1 Entity Structure & Business Formation

- Form a dedicated LLC (or series LLC for multi-park operators) to hold the real estate and operating business separately from your personal assets.
- Consider splitting the real estate holding entity from the operating entity — the property LLC leases the land/improvements to the operating LLC. This isolates operational liability (a guest injury claim) from the real estate asset itself.
- Obtain an EIN, open a dedicated business bank account, and never commingle personal and business funds — commingling is the fastest way to pierce your liability protection in a lawsuit.
- File for a fictitious/assumed name (DBA) if operating under a brand name different from your LLC's legal name.
- Set up dedicated business insurance and workers' compensation policies before hiring your first employee, not after.

2.2 Park Layout & Lot Mix Economics

Lot mix is the single highest-leverage decision in a development or major renovation. Get this wrong and you'll be retrofitting concrete pads for the next decade.

Lot Type	Typical Width	Revenue Profile	Notes
Pull-through (50A/full hookup)	16-20 ft	Highest nightly/weekly rate, fastest turnover	Most desired by big-rig transient travelers; prioritize near entrance
Back-in (30/50A)	14-16 ft	Mid-tier rate, good for varied rig sizes	More land-efficient than pull-through
Long-term/monthly lot	12-14 ft	Lower per-night rate, highest occupancy stability	Often placed at park perimeter, away from transient traffic
Tent/primitive site	Varies	Lowest rate, highest margin (low infrastructure cost)	Strong in destination/recreation-driven parks
Cabin/glamping unit	N/A	Highest ADR of all categories	Requires more capex but captures non-RV-owning travelers

A common new-developer mistake is over-building long-term lots because they look like easier, more predictable income. They are predictable — at a much lower margin per square foot than transient sites in a park with real demand. Model both scenarios before committing concrete.

2.3 Infrastructure Decisions

Electrical

- Plan amperage mix based on the RV market trend toward larger rigs: new parks should weight heavily toward 50-amp service even if it costs more upfront, since 30-amp-only sites increasingly turn away larger Class A and fifth-wheel travelers.
- Size the main electrical service and transformer for full park occupancy at peak summer load, including air conditioning — undersized transformers cause brownouts that damage guest RV electronics and generate liability claims.

Water & Sewer

- Municipal water/sewer connection is always preferable to well/septic when available — it removes an entire category of operational risk and capacity ceiling.
- If septic is required, engineer for the long-term-stay scenario, not just average daily flow — long-term residents generate sustained, hotel-like daily flow rather than the lighter average flow of transient overnight guests.
- Grease interceptors are required if you operate any food service, even a small snack bar — failing to install one is a common code violation discovered too late.

Connectivity

- Wi-Fi is now a top-3 review driver in this industry. Design for mesh coverage across the entire property, not just the office and clubhouse, and size bandwidth for streaming-level usage per site, not basic browsing.
- Cellular dead zones should be mapped before development — some guests rely entirely on cellular hotspots and will avoid a park known for poor signal.

Roads & Drainage

- Crown and ditch every internal road for positive drainage — standing water after storms is one of the most common and expensive deferred-maintenance issues in older parks.
- Budget for gravel road regrading on a recurring cycle (typically every 2-3 years depending on traffic) rather than treating it as a one-time cost.

2.4 Permits & Licensing

- Zoning/conditional use permit specific to RV park or campground use — confirm before any site work begins.

- State health department license (most states regulate campgrounds under the health department, not a separate lodging agency).
- Well and septic permits from the state environmental agency if not on municipal utilities.
- Building permits for any permanent structures: office, bathhouse, laundry, pool, cabins.
- Fire marshal review, especially for fire pit policies, propane storage, and emergency vehicle access width.
- Sales/lodging tax registration with state and local tax authorities — RV park stays are taxable lodging in most states, including short-term stays under a certain length.

2.5 ADA & Accessibility Compliance

Accessibility requirements apply to RV parks just as they do to hotels, and this is frequently overlooked in older properties.

- A minimum percentage of sites (varies by total site count) must meet accessible design standards including firm, stable, slip-resistant surfaces and accessible routes to restrooms and amenities.
- Restrooms, showers, and the office/check-in counter must have an accessible route and accessible fixtures.
- Pool lifts are required at many public pools under ADA standards — confirm current requirements with a qualified ADA consultant for your specific amenity mix.

WHY THIS MATTERS: ADA non-compliance is one of the most common sources of demand-letter litigation against small hospitality properties, and plaintiff's attorneys actively search for non-compliant pools and parking. This is not a 'someday' item.

2.6 Pet, Age, and Stay Policies

- Decide your pet policy with insurance in mind: breed restrictions, weight limits, and leash requirements affect your liability insurance premium and claim exposure.
- Age-restricted (55+) sections require careful compliance with the Housing for Older Persons Act exemption rules if you want fair housing protection for the restriction — get this reviewed by an attorney rather than copying another park's policy verbatim.
- Maximum length-of-stay policies should be written into your rental agreements from day one; retrofitting a max-stay limit onto existing long-term guests later is both an operational and legal headache (see Part 6).

2.7 Signage & Wayfinding

Wayfinding is consistently underrated during development and consistently complained about by guests after opening.

- Site number signage should be visible from a moving vehicle at night, not just from a walking pace in daylight — reflective or lit numbering pays for itself in reduced front-desk calls.
- Speed limit, one-way road direction, and pedestrian signage reduce the single most common minor-incident category in larger parks: vehicle and golf cart conflicts with walkers and children.
- Entrance signage should be legible and well-lit for a vehicle towing a trailer making a decision at highway speed — a beautiful sign that's unreadable from the road doesn't convert drive-by traffic.

2.8 Security Infrastructure

- Entrance gate or camera coverage deters the two most common security issues in this industry: unauthorized after-hours camping and theft from unattended sites.
- Adequate common-area lighting (bathhouse paths, laundry, parking) is both a security measure and a guest-experience expectation, particularly for solo travelers.
- A documented lost-and-found and key/access-code reset procedure reduces a steady stream of small but reputation-affecting guest friction points.

2.9 Sustainability & Utility Cost Control

- Sub-metering electric and water at each site, even on transient sites, allows you to identify abnormal usage (a guest running multiple AC units or leaving water running) before it shows up as an unexplained utility bill spike.
- LED lighting retrofits in common areas and bathhouses reduce a recurring operating cost with a short payback period, particularly relevant for parks running lighting on generators or solar in remote locations.
- Drought-tolerant landscaping in common areas reduces both water cost and mowing/maintenance labor in regions with water restrictions or high irrigation cost.

Part 3: Daily Operations

This is the chapter that determines whether the business plan in Parts 1 and 2 ever survives contact with reality. Operations is where RV parks are won or lost — not in the spreadsheet.

3.1 Staffing & Organizational Structure

Staffing scales dramatically by site count and amenity level, but a workable baseline structure for a mid-size park (75-150 sites) looks like:

- General Manager / Owner-Operator — owns P&L, staffing, and guest escalations.
- Front desk / guest services (often part-time or seasonal) — check-in/out, reservations, phone and email response.
- Maintenance / grounds — preventive maintenance, mowing, pad and road upkeep, emergency repairs.
- Housekeeping (if cabins, bathhouse, or rental units exist) — turnover cleaning and daily common-area upkeep.
- Seasonal camp hosts — common in destination parks during peak season, often compensated with a free or discounted site plus hourly pay.

Hiring Seasonal Staff

- Start recruiting 60-90 days before peak season — the best camp hosts and seasonal workers are often retired RVers who plan their travel season early and choose between competing park offers.
- Workamper-specific job boards and RV lifestyle communities are far more effective recruiting channels than general job boards for camp host and maintenance roles.
- Have a written, simple training checklist for seasonal hires — turnover is high in this labor pool and undocumented institutional knowledge walks out the door every fall.

3.2 Reservation Systems & Rate Strategy

- A dedicated campground PMS (property management system) is non-negotiable past roughly 30 sites — spreadsheets and paper ledgers cause double-bookings that destroy guest trust fast.
- Dynamic/seasonal pricing should reflect at minimum three demand tiers: peak season weekends, peak season weekdays, and off-season — most under-monetized parks have a single flat rate year-round.
- Minimum-night requirements on weekends and holidays prevent fragmented one-night bookings from blocking a prime pull-through site that could otherwise capture a 4-night stay.

- Cancellation and deposit policy should scale with how far out the booking is and how seasonal the demand is — a flexible policy in your shoulder season can fill sites that would otherwise sit empty; a strict policy in peak season protects revenue from late cancellations you can't realistically refill.

3.3 OTA Strategy vs. Direct Booking

Online travel agencies and campground-specific booking platforms (Campspot, Good Sam/Good Neighbor Park network, KOA, Hipcamp, and others) bring discovery traffic at the cost of meaningful commission — often in the 10-20%+ range depending on the platform and contract terms.

- Treat OTAs as a guest acquisition channel, not your primary revenue channel. Every OTA guest should receive a clear, easy path to book direct next time (loyalty discount, email capture, printed reminder at checkout).
- List on the platforms your specific guest demographic actually uses — a destination resort park's ideal guest searches different platforms than a highway overnight stop's guest.
- Keep your own direct-booking website and engine fast, mobile-friendly, and commission-free — every dollar that moves from OTA to direct booking is pure margin.

> **REALITY CHECK:** Many small park owners discover their 'OTA problem' only after a full season of bookings reveals what 15% commission actually costs in dollar terms. Run the math on your actual booking mix before renewing any OTA contract.

3.4 Check-In, Check-Out & Guest Flow

- Self-check-in kiosks or after-hours lockbox/code systems extend your effective office hours without staffing cost, which matters enormously for late-arriving highway travelers.
- A simple, visual site map (physical or digital) at check-in reduces the single most common front-desk friction point: guests not knowing where their site is or how to get there with a large rig.
- Standardize a checkout time and a clear late-checkout fee policy — ambiguity here creates same-day turnover conflicts during your highest-demand days.

3.5 Preventive Maintenance

Reactive maintenance is always more expensive than preventive maintenance in this industry, because infrastructure failures (septic, electrical, water) directly stop revenue and create guest emergencies simultaneously.

System	Recommended Check Frequency	What to Inspect
Electrical pedestals	Quarterly	Breaker function, GFCI trip test, corrosion, loose connections

System	Recommended Check Frequency	What to Inspect
Water spigots & backflow preventers	Quarterly	Leaks, pressure, backflow device certification status
Septic tanks	Annual pump-out inspection (more often at high occupancy)	Sludge level, baffle condition, drain field saturation
Roads & pads	Seasonal (spring/fall)	Potholes, drainage pooling, washout at culverts
Pool/spa	Daily chemical check; annual equipment service	Chemical balance, filtration, fencing/gate latch function
Playground equipment	Monthly	Loose hardware, surfacing depth, sharp edges, rust
Fire extinguishers & smoke detectors (common areas)	Annual + monthly visual check	Charge level, inspection tag currency

3.6 Emergency & Weather Procedures

- Written severe weather protocol specific to your region (tornado, hurricane, flash flood, wildfire) including a designated shelter location and a guest notification method that doesn't rely solely on cell service.
- A NOAA weather radio or equivalent alert system in the office, independent of internet connectivity.
- Evacuation route signage and a pre-planned communication tree for staff during a property-wide emergency.
- Photograph and document all storm/flood damage immediately for insurance claims — see Part 7 for the FEMA/insurance claim process in detail.

3.7 Problem Guests & Difficult Situations

- Have a written, consistently enforced rules sheet provided at check-in (quiet hours, pet policy, fire policy, guest visitor policy) — enforcement only holds up when guests received and acknowledged the rules in writing.
- Document every incident in writing, with dates, even minor ones — a pattern of documented complaints is what protects you if an eviction or non-renewal is later challenged.
- Know your state's specific legal process for removing a guest, and understand it differs sharply for a one-night transient guest versus a long-term tenant (see Part 6) — self-help eviction (changing locks, shutting off utilities) is illegal in most states once tenancy rights have attached.
- De-escalation training for front-desk staff reduces incidents that would otherwise require a manager or law enforcement response.

3.8 Housekeeping & Common Area Standards

For parks with cabins, rental units, or a bathhouse, housekeeping quality is disproportionately influential on guest reviews relative to its operating cost.

- Bathhouse cleaning should run on a documented multi-check-per-day schedule during peak season, with a visible cleaning log guests can see — visible accountability measurably reduces cleanliness complaints even when the underlying cleaning frequency hasn't changed.
- Cabin/rental unit turnover checklists should be standardized and inspected, not left to individual housekeeper judgment, to keep quality consistent across high-turnover season weekends.
- Restock consumables (toilet paper, soap, paper towels) on a schedule rather than waiting for a guest complaint to trigger a restock — running out during a holiday weekend is entirely preventable.

3.9 Golf Cart & Vehicle Policy

- Require a signed golf cart waiver and minimum driver age policy — golf cart incidents are a common and often underinsured liability category in larger parks.
- Post and enforce a clear speed limit for all internal vehicle and golf cart traffic, especially near play areas and pedestrian paths.
- If you rent golf carts, maintain a documented maintenance log and pre-rental inspection checklist — a mechanical failure on a rented cart creates direct liability exposure.

3.10 Quiet Hours & Noise Enforcement

- Quiet hours need a specific time window stated in writing and consistently enforced — inconsistent enforcement (different rules for different guests) is a top driver of guest-versus-guest conflict complaints.
- Generator-running hours should be addressed explicitly and separately from general quiet hours, since generator noise carries differently than voices or music and is a frequent source of complaints in mixed-amenity parks.
- Train staff to respond to noise complaints promptly and in person rather than by phone when possible — a visible response reassures the complaining guest even before the issue is fully resolved.

Part 4: Financial Management

Generic small-business accounting categories don't capture how an RV park actually makes and loses money. This section gives you a structure built for the asset class, not adapted from one.

4.1 RV-Park-Specific Chart of Accounts

Category	Examples
Site Revenue	Nightly, weekly, monthly, and annual lot rent (often split by transient vs. long-term)
Ancillary Revenue	Propane, firewood, ice, vending, laundry, golf cart rental, bike rental, store sales
Utility Reimbursement Revenue	Metered electric/water billback to long-term tenants
Amenity Revenue	Pool/day-use fees, event hosting, pavilion rental
Fee Revenue	Pet fees, extra-guest fees, late checkout, cancellation fees
Payroll & Labor	Front desk, maintenance, housekeeping, seasonal camp hosts, payroll taxes
Utilities (Operating)	Electric, water/sewer, propane, trash, internet for park-wide infrastructure
Repairs & Maintenance	Routine repairs distinct from capital improvements
Capital Reserves	Funded reserve for roof, pool, road, septic, and major system replacement
Sales & Occupancy Tax	Pass-through lodging tax collected and remitted, tracked separately from revenue
Insurance	General liability, property, flood, workers' comp, umbrella
Marketing	OTA commissions, website/SEO, paid ads, signage

4.2 Hidden & Underused Revenue Streams

Most parks under-monetize ancillary revenue because it requires almost no incremental infrastructure cost relative to the margin it generates.

- Propane refill/exchange — high margin, near-zero labor if set up as a self-serve metered station.
- Firewood and fire-starter bundles — extremely high margin, especially in destination parks where guests don't want to source their own.
- Golf cart and e-bike rentals — strong margin on larger properties where walking the grounds is impractical.

- Laundry (card or app-based payment) — steady, low-maintenance recurring revenue.
- Small camp store (ice, drinks, snacks, RV supplies, forgotten-item essentials) — captures spend that otherwise leaves the property entirely.
- Day-use / pool-access fees for local non-staying visitors during slow weekdays.
- Event and pavilion rental — family reunions, small weddings, and group rallies generate revenue with minimal added cost in an already-built common area.
- Referral and affiliate revenue from local attractions, tour operators, and restaurants that pay a small commission for guest referrals from the front desk.

4.3 Seasonal Cash Flow Management

Seasonality is the single biggest cash management challenge specific to this industry, and it catches new owners off guard every single year.

- Build a 12-month rolling cash flow model before your first season, not after — model the actual trough months, not an annualized average.
- Maintain a dedicated operating reserve equal to several months of fixed costs (payroll, debt service, insurance, utilities) to cover the off-season trough without relying on a line of credit.
- Pre-sell annual or seasonal long-term sites before the season starts — this front-loads cash exactly when you need it for spring opening costs.
- If your region has a hard off-season, evaluate whether a complementary long-term-stay segment (traveling workforce, snowbirds, students) can smooth the trough rather than closing entirely.

THE TRAP: New owners frequently underwrite the business using peak-season monthly revenue extrapolated across 12 months. This single modeling error is responsible for more RV park financial distress than any other underwriting mistake. See Part 7 for the full breakdown of the 'ghost season' cash trap.

4.4 Capital Reserves & Budgeting

- Fund a dedicated capital reserve account monthly, even when cash is tight — treat it like a non-negotiable expense, not a discretionary savings goal.
- Build a rolling 10-year capex forecast covering roads, septic/sewer, pool resurfacing, pedestal replacement, and roofing on any structures — these are predictable expenses, not surprises, if tracked proactively.
- Get multiple contractor bids annually for your largest recurring capex categories (road regrading, septic pumping) — pricing in this niche market can vary significantly between providers.

4.5 Taxes

- Sales/lodging/occupancy tax: confirm exact requirements with your state and local tax authority, including any minimum-stay exemption thresholds (many states exempt stays over 30 days from lodging tax, shifting that revenue into long-term tenant treatment instead).
- Property tax appeals: campground assessments are sometimes based on outdated comparable methodology — a property tax consultant familiar with hospitality/RV assets can identify over-assessment.
- Cost segregation studies can accelerate depreciation on site improvements, utility infrastructure, and amenities separately from the underlying land and building, often producing meaningful near-term tax benefit for new acquisitions.

4.6 Key Performance Indicators

KPI	Formula	Why It Matters
Occupancy Rate	Occupied site-nights ÷ Available site-nights	Core demand indicator, compare by season and lot type
ADR (Average Daily Rate)	Total site revenue ÷ Occupied site-nights	Reveals pricing power independent of occupancy
RevPAS (Revenue per Available Site)	Total site revenue ÷ Total available sites	Blended metric combining rate and occupancy, best single top-line KPI
ALOS (Average Length of Stay)	Total occupied nights ÷ Number of stays	Longer stays reduce turnover labor cost per revenue dollar
Ancillary Revenue per Site	Ancillary revenue ÷ Occupied site-nights	Tracks how well you're monetizing beyond the lot fee

4.7 Debt Service & Coverage Ratios

- Debt Service Coverage Ratio (DSCR) — NOI divided by total annual debt payments — is the metric lenders watch most closely, and you should model it on trough-season cash flow, not annualized averages, given the seasonality discussed above.
- Build a covenant calendar tracking any lender-required minimum DSCR, reporting deadlines, and reserve requirements — missing a covenant deadline can trigger default provisions even when the underlying business is healthy.
- Avoid stacking short-term, high-rate bridge debt on top of permanent financing without a clear, dated refinance plan — bridge debt used past its intended window quietly erodes margin every month it remains outstanding.

4.8 Annual Budgeting Process

- Build next year's budget bottom-up from the current year's actuals plus known changes (rate increases, new amenities, contract renewals) rather than top-down percentage targets — top-down budgets tend to miss the specific cost realities of this asset class.
- Review budget-to-actual monthly, not quarterly — seasonality means a quarterly review can mask a problem that's been building for two full months before anyone notices.
- Separate capital budget from operating budget explicitly so a large capex item doesn't distort your read on operating performance for the year.

4.9 Benchmarking Against the Industry

Without a comparable benchmark, it's difficult to know whether your occupancy, ADR, and expense ratios are strong or weak for your park type and region.

- Join regional and national campground association groups where operators informally share performance benchmarks — this kind of peer data is more useful for this niche asset class than generic small-business benchmarking tools.
- Track your own metrics on a consistent month-over-month and year-over-year basis even before you have external benchmarks — your own trend line is often the most actionable data you have in year one.

Part 5: Marketing & Guest Experience

Marketing for an RV park is closer to local tourism marketing than national hotel-brand marketing. Your buyer is searching for a destination and a vibe, not a chain standard.

5.1 Brand & Positioning

- Decide explicitly which guest you're optimizing for: family destination, quiet adult retreat, big-rig-friendly highway stop, or long-term workforce housing. Trying to be all of them dilutes your marketing and your guest experience.
- Your photography is your single highest-leverage marketing asset — professional, well-lit photos of actual sites (not stock images) consistently outperform paid ad spend in this industry.
- Consistency across your website, OTA listings, and social media (same name, same photos, same description) builds trust; mismatched information between platforms is a common source of guest confusion and review complaints.

5.2 Website & SEO

- Local SEO matters more than generic SEO for this business — most searches include a city, region, or nearby landmark name. Make sure your Google Business Profile is fully filled out, accurate, and actively managed.
- Direct-booking capability on your own website (not just a 'call us' page) captures revenue that would otherwise default to a commissioned OTA.
- Keep site information (rates, amenities, pet policy, max rig length) genuinely current — outdated information online generates avoidable front-desk calls and bad first impressions.
- Mobile responsiveness is critical: a large share of campground searches happen from a phone, often from the road.

5.3 Social Media & Content

- User-generated content (guest photos, tagged posts) is more persuasive to prospective RV travelers than produced marketing content — actively encourage and reshare it.
- Short-form video showing the actual arrival experience, site sizes, and amenities reduces a major source of booking hesitation: not knowing what they're actually getting.
- Post seasonally relevant content (fall foliage, holiday lighting, local events) timed to when your audience is actively planning, not just when content happens to be ready.

5.4 Review Management

- Respond to every review, positive and negative, professionally and promptly — prospective guests read your responses as much as the reviews themselves.
- Address negative reviews with a specific, non-defensive acknowledgment and, where appropriate, an offline resolution offer — never argue with a guest publicly.
- Build a habit of proactively asking happy guests for a review at checkout — review volume and recency both affect ranking on OTA and search platforms.

REALITY CHECK: A handful of unanswered negative reviews can do more damage to bookings than a slightly higher rate. Review management is a daily operational task, not a quarterly one.

5.5 Referral & Loyalty Programs

- A simple punch-card or app-based loyalty program (e.g., every 10th night free) rewards your most valuable segment: repeat long-stay and annual-pattern travelers.
- Referral discounts for guests who bring friends or family groups capture word-of-mouth, which remains the single strongest acquisition channel in the RV travel community.
- Email capture at booking and checkout enables low-cost direct remarketing for next season — don't let this list sit unused.

5.6 Guest Experience Touchpoints

Map the entire guest journey and look for friction at each step, not just the obvious ones:

6. Pre-arrival: confirmation clarity, directions for large rigs (avoiding low bridges/tight turns), and what to expect at check-in.
7. Arrival: site findability, pull-in ease, and a friendly first human interaction.
8. Stay: amenity cleanliness, Wi-Fi reliability, noise control, and staff responsiveness to issues.
9. Departure: clear checkout process and an invitation to leave a review or rebook.
10. Post-stay: a thank-you follow-up and loyalty/referral offer while the experience is still fresh.

5.7 Email & Direct Marketing

- Segment your email list by guest type (transient vs. long-term, family vs. solo traveler, repeat vs. first-time) and tailor offers accordingly — a generic blast to your full list underperforms targeted seasonal offers.
- Send a pre-season “book your return visit” campaign to last year's peak-season guests before your booking calendar opens — repeat guests are your highest-margin, lowest-acquisition-cost segment.
- Use shoulder-season email promotions specifically to fill the demand gap identified in your seasonal cash flow model (Part 4), rather than discounting peak-season inventory that would have sold anyway.

5.8 Rally, Club & Group Marketing

- RV clubs, brand-specific owner groups (Airstream, FMCA, Good Sam chapters), and rally organizers book large blocks of sites and represent a meaningfully different sales motion than individual transient bookings — build direct relationships with regional rally organizers rather than waiting for them to find you.
- Offer a group-block rate and a single point of contact for rally coordinators — the administrative simplicity you provide is often as persuasive as the discount itself.
- A successful rally generates its own word-of-mouth marketing within that community — treat your first rally booking with a given club as a marketing investment, not just a transaction.

Part 6: Legal & Risk Management

This is the chapter most owner-operators learn the hard way. None of this replaces a licensed attorney in your state — laws governing tenancy, eviction, and liability vary significantly by jurisdiction — but every owner should understand these concepts well enough to ask the right questions.

6.1 Transient Guest vs. Long-Term Tenant: The Distinction That Changes Everything

This is arguably the single most important legal concept in RV park operation, and the one most frequently misunderstood by new owners.

- A transient guest (typically defined by a short stay below a state-specific threshold, often around 30 days, though the exact threshold varies by state) can generally be asked to leave under your posted rules with minimal formal process, similar to a hotel guest.
- Once a guest's stay crosses into long-term tenancy — again, the exact threshold and triggering factors vary by state and sometimes by local ordinance — they may gain landlord-tenant rights, including formal notice periods and a court eviction process before they can be removed.
- Self-help eviction (shutting off power/water, changing locks, or physically removing a tenant's belongings) is illegal once tenancy rights have attached in most states, even if the guest is significantly behind on payment or violating rules.

THE PRACTICAL FIX: Write your rental agreements explicitly defining stay categories and renewal terms from day one, and have an attorney confirm your state's specific tenancy threshold. Trying to keep a guest 'transient' indefinitely through informal month-to-month renewals without addressing this in your agreement is a common and risky shortcut.

6.2 Rental Agreements

- Use a written agreement for every guest category — nightly, weekly, monthly, and annual — each tailored to that stay type's legal treatment and cancellation terms.
- Include explicit rules incorporation language so your posted rules (quiet hours, pet policy, guest visitor policy, RV condition standards) are part of the enforceable contract, not just a courtesy sign.
- Address RV condition and removal standards directly — many parks have had long-term, non-paying occupants effectively become unremovable because the agreement never addressed what happens to an abandoned or deteriorating unit (see Part 7 for the abandoned RV scenario in detail).
- Specify utility billing methodology clearly if reimbursed separately from lot rent, to avoid billing disputes with long-term tenants.

6.3 Eviction Process Basics

- Confirm your state's required notice period and format (often a specific number of days, delivered in a specific legally-recognized manner) before initiating any removal of a long-term tenant.
- File through the appropriate local court process if a tenant does not vacate after proper notice — never attempt to physically remove a tenant or their property without a court order once tenancy rights apply.
- Document the underlying cause (non-payment, lease violation) thoroughly and contemporaneously — courts expect a clear paper trail, not a verbal account after the fact.

6.4 Insurance Stack

Coverage	Why You Need It
General Liability	Guest injury, slip-and-fall, pool incidents — your foundational policy
Commercial Property	Office, bathhouse, clubhouse, and other structures against fire, wind, and other covered perils
Flood Insurance	Separate from standard property coverage; essential if any part of the property sits in or near a floodplain
Workers' Compensation	Required in nearly all states once you have employees, including seasonal staff
Commercial Umbrella	Extends liability limits above your general liability policy for catastrophic claims
Pollution/Environmental Liability	Covers septic system failures, fuel spills, or other environmental contamination events
Business Interruption	Replaces lost income if a covered event (fire, storm) forces a temporary closure

6.5 OSHA & Employee Safety

- OSHA general industry standards apply to RV park employers — maintain a written safety program covering equipment use (mowers, chainsaws, pool chemicals) and provide required personal protective equipment.
- Maintain Safety Data Sheets for all pool and cleaning chemicals on-site and accessible to staff.
- Document safety training for seasonal staff just as thoroughly as for year-round employees — seasonal status doesn't reduce your compliance obligation.

6.6 ADA Litigation Risk

As noted in Part 2, ADA compliance gaps are a common and active source of litigation against small hospitality properties. Plaintiff's firms specifically target non-compliant pools, parking, and accessible routes. Conduct a periodic accessibility audit with a qualified consultant rather than waiting for a demand letter.

6.7 Fair Housing Considerations

- If you operate any age-restricted section, ensure it meets the specific exemption criteria under the Housing for Older Persons Act — an improperly structured age restriction can expose you to fair housing claims.
- Apply rental criteria (income verification, background checks, pet policy) consistently and in writing for long-term tenants to avoid disparate-treatment claims.

6.8 Vendor & Contractor Agreements

- Require proof of insurance and a signed contract from every outside contractor working on-site (landscaping, septic pumping, electrical) — an uninsured contractor's injury on your property can become your liability.
- Use written agreements for recurring vendors (propane delivery, trash service, internet provider) specifying service levels and renewal/cancellation terms to avoid unfavorable auto-renewals.

6.9 Dispute Resolution Clauses

- Consider an arbitration or mediation clause in long-term rental agreements to manage litigation cost and timeline for routine disputes, while understanding that arbitration clauses face increasing scrutiny in some states for consumer and residential tenancy contracts — have this reviewed by your attorney rather than copying a template.
- Specify a venue/jurisdiction clause in vendor and rental agreements so disputes are resolved in your home county's court system rather than a guest's or vendor's home state.

6.10 Guest Data & Privacy

- Reservation and PMS systems collect personal and payment information that carries its own compliance obligations — understand your payment processor's PCI-DSS requirements and avoid storing card numbers outside a compliant system.
- If you use security cameras on the property, post clear notice and understand your state's specific laws on audio recording consent, which are stricter than video-only recording in many states.

6.11 Liability Waivers & Signage

- Liability waivers for pools, playgrounds, and rental equipment (golf carts, bikes, kayaks) reduce but do not eliminate liability — courts in many states will not enforce a waiver against gross negligence, so a waiver is a supplement to good maintenance practice, not a substitute for it.
- Post required warning signage (no lifeguard on duty, depth markers, playground age recommendations) per your state and insurer's specific requirements — missing required signage can independently undermine an otherwise valid liability defense.

Part 7: What Nobody Tells You

Every chapter before this one covers what's supposed to happen. This chapter covers what actually happens — the recurring, predictable surprises that experienced operators stop being surprised by, but that catch nearly every new owner off guard at least once.

7.1 The Septic Disaster Nobody Budgets For

Septic failures don't announce themselves politely. They show up as a wet spot near the drain field on a Saturday during your busiest weekend of the year, and by the time you smell it, the system has usually been struggling for weeks.

- Get a baseline inspection and pump-out schedule the day you take ownership, regardless of what the seller told you — you have no real history with the system and no way to know its true condition.
- A failed drain field is not a quick fix — replacement can take days to weeks and may require closing affected sites entirely during peak season.
- Long-term tenants flush things transient guests never would (wipes, grease, items that shouldn't go down a drain at all) — build tenant education and periodic line-clearing into your routine, not just your emergency response.

> **FIELD LESSON:** A septic system that's been quietly over capacity for a season will often fail during your highest-occupancy week, because that's exactly when daily flow finally exceeds what the system can absorb. The failure isn't bad luck — it's math catching up.

7.2 Well Water Testing & Compliance

- If you're on a private well, ongoing water quality testing isn't a one-time due diligence item — most states require periodic re-testing, and bacterial contamination can develop well after your initial test came back clean.
- A single positive bacteria test can require an immediate boil-water notice to guests and a costly remediation process — have a documented response plan ready before it happens, not after.

7.3 Abandoned RVs and Squatter Situations

This is one of the most operationally and legally painful surprises in the industry, and almost no acquisition checklist prepares buyers for it.

- An RV left behind by a tenant who stops paying is not simply your property to remove — in most states, an abandoned vehicle and any tenant's remaining personal property are subject to specific legal notice and storage procedures before disposal.

- A long-term occupant who refuses to leave, even after their agreement ends, generally cannot be removed without going through the formal eviction process described in Part 6 — this can take weeks to months depending on your court system, during which the site generates no usable revenue.
- Title and lien issues on an abandoned RV itself can complicate disposal — some states require you to pursue a lien process against the vehicle title before you can legally sell or scrap it.

PREVENTION BEATS CURE: The cheapest fix to this entire problem category is upfront: thorough tenant screening for long-term sites, a clear written agreement addressing abandonment and removal procedures, and never letting a payment problem go undocumented for more than a billing cycle.

7.4 The 'Ghost Season' Cash Flow Trap

Referenced in Part 4, this deserves its own full treatment because it is the single most common reason new RV park owners run into a cash crisis in year one.

- Fixed costs — debt service, insurance, base staffing, utilities — don't shrink in the off-season the way revenue does. A park that comfortably covers costs in July can be deeply cash-negative in January.
- New owners frequently underwrite the deal using peak-season numbers projected across all twelve months, then discover the actual trough only after they own the property.
- The fix isn't optimism — it's a funded reserve built during the peak months specifically earmarked to cover the trough, calculated from a realistic month-by-month model, not an annual average.

7.5 The Hidden Cost of 'Free' Amenities

A pool, playground, and dog park sound like pure differentiation. Each one is also a recurring cost and liability center that rarely gets modeled accurately before construction.

- Pools require daily chemical monitoring, periodic certified inspection, and meaningfully higher liability insurance — the ongoing cost frequently exceeds what owners budgeted based on construction price alone.
- Playgrounds require recurring surfacing maintenance and hardware inspection to remain compliant with safety standards, and represent a disproportionate share of guest-injury liability claims for their size.
- Dog parks generate ongoing turf/ground maintenance costs and occasional dog-on-dog incident liability that owners rarely anticipate at the planning stage.
- Before adding any amenity, model its full annual carrying cost — staffing, maintenance, insurance delta, and utilities — against the actual occupancy or rate lift it's expected to produce.

7.6 The Real Math on OTA Fees

Covered operationally in Part 3, but worth stating plainly here: many small operators never calculate the actual dollar cost of their OTA mix until they're deep into a season, because the commission is invisible at the moment of each individual booking.

- Run a quarterly report on total OTA commission paid in dollars, not just as a percentage — the number is often large enough to fund a meaningful direct-marketing budget that would reduce OTA dependence going forward.
- OTA visibility and direct-booking economics are not mutually exclusive — the goal is converting first-time OTA guests into repeat direct bookers, not abandoning OTAs entirely.

7.7 Staff Turnover Patterns Specific to This Industry

- Seasonal camp host and maintenance turnover is structurally higher than most small businesses because a large share of this labor pool is itself transient (traveling retirees, workampers) — budget for re-training every season rather than treating turnover as a failure of retention strategy.
- Year-round front desk and maintenance roles in rural park locations often face a genuinely small local labor pool — building relationships with the same reliable seasonal workers year after year is frequently more effective than constant new recruitment.

7.8 Disaster Claims & FEMA Reality

- Property insurance claims after a major storm event move faster and pay out more completely when damage is documented immediately, with timestamped photos, before any cleanup begins.
- FEMA individual and public assistance programs have specific, often narrow eligibility windows and documentation requirements — understand the process and deadlines for your area's disaster designation before you need it, not while you're also dealing with displaced guests and damaged infrastructure.
- Business interruption coverage (see Part 6) often requires you to prove the income you would have earned absent the event — keep clean historical revenue records specifically so you can substantiate this kind of claim if needed.

7.9 Technology Debt

- Many parks run on a patchwork of an aging PMS, a separate website booking widget, and manual spreadsheet workarounds accumulated over years — this 'technology debt' creates double-booking risk and wastes staff time on manual reconciliation.
- When evaluating any new software or platform, weight integration with your existing PMS and guest communication tools as heavily as the new feature itself — a powerful tool that doesn't talk to your reservation system creates more manual work, not less.

- QR-code-based guest experience and information systems are increasingly closing the gap between transient hospitality and the always-on digital experience guests now expect from any lodging stay — evaluate these less as a novelty and more as a maintenance and communication efficiency tool.

7.10 Succession & Exit Planning — Starting on Day One

- Many parks are bought from retiring owner-operators who never documented their own institutional knowledge — don't repeat that mistake. Document your own procedures as you build them, both for your own future hires and for whoever eventually buys from you.
- Clean, consistent financial records from year one make a future sale dramatically easier to underwrite and command a stronger valuation — the documentation habit you build now is a direct driver of your eventual exit price.

7.11 The Mail, Mailbox, and Residency Address Problem

Long-term residents at RV parks frequently want to use the park's address as their legal residence — for mail, vehicle registration, voter registration, or even children's school enrollment. This sounds like a minor convenience request and is actually a meaningful policy decision.

- Allowing residency-address use can strengthen a long-term occupant's legal claim to tenancy rights and complicate an eventual non-renewal or removal — decide your policy deliberately rather than allowing it ad hoc per request.
- Receiving and managing guest mail creates its own administrative burden and liability (lost packages, sensitive mail) that should have a clear, written process rather than an informal front-desk favor that grows unmanageable at scale.

7.12 The Weather App Isn't Enough

Generic weather apps are tuned for cities, not for the specific microclimate risk profile of an open, tree-lined, or riverside RV park.

- River and creek-adjacent parks need a specific upstream gauge-watching habit, not just a local forecast — flash flooding from rain falling miles upstream can raise water levels at your property hours before any rain falls locally.
- Wind-sensitive amenities (awnings, pop-up canopies, loose playground equipment) need a specific pre-storm secure-down routine, since RV-park-specific wind damage often comes from loose guest equipment becoming airborne hazards, not just structural damage.

7.13 The Slow Leak: Small Recurring Costs That Add Up

No single one of these will sink a park, and that's exactly why they survive unnoticed for years.

- Unmetered long-term sites where a tenant's actual usage has crept well above what flat-rate lot rent assumed, quietly compressing margin on that site for years.
- Comp'd sites for friends, contractors, or extended-stay favors that were never formally tracked or reviewed, accumulating into meaningful lost revenue over a season.
- Auto-renewing vendor and software contracts at rates that crept upward annually without anyone renegotiating — a recurring annual contract review catches this before it compounds for years.

THE FIX: Schedule an honest annual line-item review of every recurring cost and every comp'd or under-billed site. This single habit recovers more margin in most parks than any single big strategic initiative.

Part 8: Regional & Seasonal Playbooks

A park in the Ozarks, a park in Arizona's snowbird corridor, and a park on the Gulf Coast are different businesses wearing the same industry label. This section translates the universal principles in Parts 1-8 into region-specific operating realities.

8.1 Four-Season / Destination-Lake Regions (e.g., the Ozarks, Upper Midwest, New England)

- Plan for a genuine off-season, not a slow season — many four-season destination parks see occupancy drop to single digits for several months, which makes the seasonal cash flow planning in Part 4 non-negotiable rather than optional.
- Consider a winterization protocol for water lines, pools, and any guest-facing plumbing if you choose to close partially or fully for winter, since freeze damage to unwinterized infrastructure is one of the most expensive preventable losses in this region type.
- Shoulder-season (spring and fall) marketing toward fishing, hunting, and foliage tourism can meaningfully extend your effective season beyond the core summer months.
- Holiday weekend demand (Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day) is dramatically higher than surrounding weekends in this region type — minimum-stay and premium holiday pricing should reflect that gap explicitly rather than using a flat “peak season” rate.

8.2 Snowbird Corridor (Arizona, Southern Texas, Florida)

- The seasonal demand curve inverts relative to four-season regions: winter is peak season, and summer heat suppresses transient demand significantly in desert locations.
- Long-term and seasonal (3-6 month) snowbird stays are a much larger share of revenue here than in destination-lake parks — rate strategy and rental agreements should be built around seasonal-stay norms specific to this guest type from the start.
- Snowbird guests are highly repeat-pattern travelers who often return to the same park for years — a loyalty and early-renewal program captures this repeat behavior more effectively than acquisition-focused marketing.
- Summer cooling costs for any park-operated common areas can be a significant, easy-to-underestimate operating expense in desert climates.

8.3 Highway/Interstate Corridor Parks

- Revenue here is driven almost entirely by visibility and ease of access, not amenities — invest marketing dollars in highway signage, GPS/mapping platform accuracy, and OTA visibility rather than amenity buildout.

- Single-night stays dominate; design check-in, site assignment, and billing processes for speed and simplicity rather than the longer-stay-oriented processes that make sense at a destination resort.
- Fuel price swings and broader road-trip travel trends affect this segment more directly than any other park type — build flexibility into staffing and marketing spend to respond to demand swings outside your control.

8.4 Coastal & Hurricane-Exposed Regions

- A written, regularly rehearsed hurricane response plan — not just a generic severe weather plan — should specify evacuation timing relative to official storm tracking, guest communication method, and a pre-storm property secure-down checklist.
- Flood insurance (see Part 6) is not optional in this region type regardless of elevation certificate results — confirm coverage limits are adequate for full rebuild cost, not just the lender's minimum requirement.
- Post-storm, document everything before any cleanup begins (see Part 7's disaster claims section) and understand your specific state and FEMA disaster declaration process before hurricane season starts, not during it.

8.5 Workforce & Industrial-Adjacent Markets

Parks located near oil and gas activity, large construction projects, storm restoration staging areas, or seasonal agricultural work see a fundamentally different demand pattern: long-term workforce housing rather than recreational travel.

- Workforce-driven demand can substantially de-risk the seasonal cash flow trap described in Part 7, since this demand often runs counter-seasonal to recreational travel patterns.
- Workforce tenants are long-term occupants for landlord-tenant law purposes from day one in most cases — build rental agreements and screening processes around that reality rather than treating them as extended transient guests.
- This demand type can disappear quickly when a project ends — avoid underwriting a park's long-term value on a single project's workforce demand without a recreational/transient fallback plan.

Part 9: Technology & Systems

Technology in this industry isn't about chasing novelty — it's about closing the gap between what guests now expect from any lodging stay and what a small, often understaffed park can realistically deliver. The right systems reduce manual work; the wrong ones add a second job on top of running the park.

9.1 Choosing a Property Management System (PMS)

Your PMS is the operational backbone of the business. Evaluate candidates against your actual workflow, not a generic feature checklist.

- Real-time site map and availability view that front desk staff can read at a glance during a busy check-in rush.
- Direct two-way sync with the OTA platforms you actually use, to prevent the double-booking risk that occurs when availability isn't synced automatically.
- Built-in or integrated payment processing that supports deposits, partial payments, and refunds without requiring a separate manual reconciliation step.
- Reporting that maps to the KPIs in Part 4 (occupancy, ADR, RevPAS) without requiring manual spreadsheet exports every month.
- Mobile access for maintenance and housekeeping staff who aren't sitting at the front desk but need to see and update site status in real time.

9.2 QR Code & Digital Guest Experience Tools

QR-code-based guest portals have moved from novelty to near-expectation in the last few years, largely because they solve a genuine operational problem rather than just adding a gimmick.

- A QR code posted at each site or on a welcome packet can give guests instant access to Wi-Fi credentials, park rules, local attraction info, and a direct line to report a maintenance issue — replacing a phone call queue with a self-service flow that staff can triage rather than answer one at a time.
- Guest-reported maintenance issues routed through a digital system create a timestamped record that protects you in any later dispute about response time, while also surfacing recurring problem spots (a specific pedestal, a specific bathhouse fixture) that a verbal complaint log tends to lose.
- Scan analytics — which codes get scanned, how often, and from which areas of the park — give you a low-cost signal about which amenities and information guests actually engage with, informing both marketing emphasis and amenity investment decisions.

- These tools work best as a supplement to, not a replacement for, a human presence at the front desk — guests who want a digital self-service option get one, and guests who want a conversation still get one.

9.3 Automation Without Losing the Human Touch

- Automated booking confirmations, pre-arrival reminders, and post-stay review requests handle the repetitive communication that consumes front-desk time without adding any guest-experience value when done manually.
- Reserve automation for the predictable, repetitive parts of the guest journey and keep a human in the loop for anything involving a complaint, a special request, or a long-term tenant relationship — over-automating these erodes exactly the personal relationship that drives repeat bookings in this industry.

9.4 Data Backup & Business Continuity

- Cloud-based PMS and accounting systems should have documented backup and export procedures — know how you would access your reservation and financial data if your primary system had an outage during a peak weekend.
- Keep an offline, printable backup of current-day arrivals and departures — a rural park's internet outage during a check-in rush is a predictable, recurring event, not a rare edge case.

9.5 Payment Processing & PCI Compliance

- Use a PCI-DSS compliant payment processor integrated with your PMS rather than handling card numbers manually or storing them in spreadsheets — manual card handling creates both security risk and compliance exposure.
- Offer multiple payment methods (card, ACH for long-term tenants, digital wallets) to reduce friction, particularly for older RV travelers who may prefer different methods than younger guests.

Part 10: Growth & Exit

Whether your goal is to build a multi-park portfolio or simply maximize the value of one well-run property before selling, the principles in this section apply equally.

10.1 Scaling to Multiple Parks

- Standardize your operating procedures (check-in flow, maintenance schedules, rate strategy, rules enforcement) before acquiring a second property — undocumented, single-property habits don't transfer cleanly to a second site without a system behind them.
- Centralize functions that benefit from scale (marketing, bookkeeping, vendor negotiation) while keeping on-site operations decentralized enough to respond to local market conditions.
- A shared technology stack (PMS, website platform, guest communication tools) across properties reduces per-park overhead and gives you portfolio-level reporting you can't get from disconnected systems.

10.2 Franchise vs. Independent

Model	Pros	Cons
Franchise (e.g., branded campground network)	Built-in brand recognition, marketing support, standardized systems	Franchise fees, royalty on revenue, less flexibility on positioning
Independent	Full control of brand, pricing, and positioning; no royalty	Must build awareness and systems from scratch
Affiliate/Network Membership	Discovery traffic and credibility without full franchise commitment	Listing fees and standards compliance without full brand support

10.3 Exit Strategies

- Outright sale to an individual owner-operator — the most common exit for single-property owners, valued primarily on trailing NOI and per-site comparables (see Part 1).
- Sale to a consolidator or portfolio operator — these buyers often value standardized operations and clean financial documentation more heavily than a typical individual buyer, rewarding the documentation habits built in Part 7.
- 1031 exchange into a like-kind property — allows deferral of capital gains tax when reinvesting proceeds into another qualifying real estate asset; requires strict timelines and a qualified intermediary.
- Family succession — requires the same documentation and systemization as a sale to a stranger, plus an explicit plan for transferring both ownership and operating knowledge.

10.4 Maximizing Sale Value

- Three years of clean, consistent financials with no major unexplained swings is the single highest-leverage thing you can do to support a strong valuation.
- Address known deferred maintenance before listing — buyers will discount price further than the actual repair cost to account for the uncertainty of unknown additional issues.
- Document all systems, vendor relationships, and staff roles in a transition binder — a park that can run without the current owner standing on-site every day is worth more than one that can't.

Appendices

Appendix A: Acquisition Due Diligence Checklist

- Trailing 36-month P&L statements
- Lot-by-lot rent roll with stay type and tenure
- Septic/well inspection and water quality test results
- Electrical infrastructure and transformer capacity review
- Zoning verification letter
- All operating permits and licenses
- Environmental Phase I assessment
- FEMA flood map status
- Existing OTA contracts and commission terms
- Title search for easements and mineral rights
- Equipment and personal property inventory
- Existing tenant leases and rental agreements

Appendix B: Monthly Preventive Maintenance Checklist

- Test all electrical pedestal breakers and GFCI function
- Inspect playground hardware and surfacing depth
- Check pool chemical balance and equipment function (daily during season)
- Walk all roads and pads for drainage issues and surface damage
- Test backflow preventers and water spigots
- Visual fire extinguisher and smoke detector check
- Review Wi-Fi coverage and bandwidth utilization

Appendix C: New Guest Check-In Checklist

- Verify reservation, length of stay, and rig size/type
- Provide site map and directions appropriate for rig size
- Review and have guest acknowledge posted rules (quiet hours, pets, fires, visitors)
- Confirm Wi-Fi access information
- Explain checkout time and late checkout policy
- Capture email for post-stay follow-up and loyalty program

Appendix D: Glossary of Industry Terms

Term	Definition
ADR	Average Daily Rate — total site revenue divided by occupied site-nights
ALOS	Average Length of Stay
Back-in site	A site where the RV reverses into position rather than driving straight through
Camp host	A seasonal, often RV-traveling worker who lives on-site in exchange for reduced rent and/or pay
NOI	Net Operating Income — revenue minus operating expenses, before debt service
OTA	Online Travel Agency / third-party booking platform
Pull-through site	A site allowing entry and exit without backing up, generally preferred for large rigs
RevPAS	Revenue per Available Site — a blended occupancy/rate performance metric
Workamper	A traveling worker who takes seasonal jobs, often at campgrounds, in exchange for a site and/or pay

Appendix E: Further Resources

5Star Camp (5star.camp) provides QR-code-based guest experience tools purpose-built for the workflows described throughout this book, including guest information portals, maintenance status tracking, and scan analytics for park operators.

Always confirm current state-specific regulations with a licensed attorney, and current tax treatment with a CPA familiar with hospitality and real estate — this book is a operating framework, not a substitute for professional advice in your jurisdiction.

Appendix F: Sample Annual Operating Calendar (Four-Season Region Example)

Month	Key Focus
January	Off-season maintenance, budgeting for the year, capital project planning
February	Staff recruiting for season, marketing campaign prep, rate card finalization
March	Spring infrastructure inspection (roads, pedestals, septic), pre-season hiring
April	Opening preparations, amenity inspections, staff training
May	Season opens, Memorial Day peak pricing, full staffing online
June	Peak season ramp-up, mid-season maintenance checks

Month	Key Focus
July	Peak demand (July 4th), highest staffing and revenue period
August	Continued peak season, start of fall marketing planning
September	Labor Day peak, shoulder-season rate transition begins
October	Fall foliage/shoulder-season marketing push, capex planning for off-season projects
November	Season wind-down, winterization if applicable, year-end financial review
December	Off-season capital projects, next year's budget finalized, holiday skeleton staffing

Appendix G: Sample Hiring Interview Questions — General Manager / On-Site Manager

11. Describe a time you had to make a decision about a guest or tenant issue without being able to reach the owner. What did you decide and why?
12. How would you handle a long-term tenant who is consistently late on payment but otherwise a model resident?
13. Walk me through how you'd prioritize a maintenance issue list with limited staff during a holiday weekend.
14. What's your experience with reservation/PMS systems, and how comfortable are you learning a new one?
15. Describe how you'd handle a severe weather event while guests are on-site.
16. How do you approach enforcing rules consistently while keeping the guest experience positive?

Appendix H: Sample Tiered Rate Structure Framework

Tier	Typical Timing	Strategy
Peak Weekend	Major holidays, summer weekends in destination regions	Highest rate, minimum-stay requirement, strict cancellation policy
Peak Weekday	Summer weekdays in destination regions	High rate, more flexible minimum stay
Shoulder Season	Spring/fall in four-season regions	Moderate rate, promotional flexibility to build occupancy
Off-Season	Winter in four-season regions, summer in desert regions	Lowest transient rate; pivot marketing toward long-term/seasonal stays
Long-Term/Monthly	Year-round availability	Discounted nightly-equivalent rate in exchange for occupancy stability

Appendix I: Closing Note

If there's one thread running through every chapter of this book, it's this: the parks that perform best over the long run are not the ones with the fanciest amenities or the flashiest marketing. They're the ones run by operators who took the unglamorous, easy-to-skip fundamentals seriously — the septic inspection nobody wanted to pay for, the rental agreement clause that took an extra hour with an attorney, the monthly reserve contribution that felt unnecessary in a good month. This book exists so you don't have to learn every one of those lessons the expensive way.

Appendix J: Your First 90 Days as a New Owner

Days 1-30: Stabilize

17. Confirm insurance is active with no coverage gap from the prior owner's policy.
18. Walk every site personally and note any condition issues not caught in due diligence.
19. Introduce yourself to every staff member retained from the prior ownership and confirm roles and pay in writing.
20. Verify all utility accounts have been transferred and confirm no service interruption risk.
21. Set up your own bookkeeping/chart of accounts structure (Part 4) rather than inheriting the prior owner's informal system.

Days 31-60: Observe and Document

22. Shadow a full operating cycle — check-ins, checkouts, a maintenance emergency if one occurs — before making major procedural changes.
23. Begin a written procedures binder for every recurring task, even ones you're personally handling for now.
24. Review every existing vendor contract for renewal dates and terms; flag any auto-renewing agreements that need a decision before they lock in another term.
25. Start your KPI tracking (Part 4) from day one, even with imperfect early data — the trend line matters more than any single data point.

Days 61-90: Improve

26. Identify your single highest-leverage fix — often a pricing gap, an underused ancillary revenue stream, or a deferred maintenance item — and address it deliberately rather than trying to fix everything at once.
27. Begin building your capital reserve and seasonal cash flow model if the prior owner didn't maintain one (Part 4).
28. Have your rental agreements and rules sheet reviewed by an attorney familiar with your state's landlord-tenant law, even if you inherited agreements from the prior owner.

Appendix K: Sample Park Rules Sheet Topics

A complete rules sheet should be written and reviewed by your attorney for your specific state, but every park's rules sheet should address each of the following topics explicitly rather than leaving them implied:

- Check-in and checkout times, and late checkout policy/fee
- Quiet hours and generator-running hours
- Pet policy: number, weight/breed restrictions, leash requirement, designated relief areas
- Maximum occupants per site and visitor/guest policy
- Fire policy: permitted locations, fire pit requirements, burn bans
- Speed limit and vehicle/golf cart rules
- RV condition standards (applicable particularly to long-term sites)
- Site maintenance responsibilities (mowing, upkeep) for long-term tenants
- Cancellation, refund, and no-show policy
- Grounds for immediate removal and the process that will be followed

Appendix L: Key Clauses Every Rental Agreement Should Address

This is a checklist of topics to cover with your attorney when drafting or reviewing rental agreements — not a substitute for one, since exact enforceable language varies significantly by state.

- Stay classification (transient vs. long-term) and the specific terms that apply to each
- Rent amount, due date, late fee structure, and accepted payment methods
- Utility billing methodology if billed separately from lot rent
- Incorporation of the posted rules sheet by reference as part of the enforceable agreement
- Notice period and process required before non-renewal or termination, matching your state's specific landlord-tenant requirements
- RV and personal property condition standards, and the process for addressing an abandoned unit
- Liability and waiver language for use of amenities
- Insurance requirements, if any, for the tenant's own RV and personal property

Appendix M: Sample Monthly P&L Line-Item Structure

Use this as a starting template for your own chart of accounts (Part 4), adapted to your specific revenue mix and region.

Line Item	Category
Transient site revenue	Revenue

Line Item	Category
Long-term/monthly site revenue	Revenue
Utility reimbursement income	Revenue
Store, propane, firewood, vending	Revenue
Rental equipment (golf cart, bike, kayak)	Revenue
Pavilion/event rental income	Revenue
Front desk & guest services payroll	Expense — Labor
Maintenance & grounds payroll	Expense — Labor
Housekeeping payroll	Expense — Labor
Payroll taxes & benefits	Expense — Labor
Electric (park-wide infrastructure)	Expense — Utilities
Water/sewer or septic service	Expense — Utilities
Trash & recycling	Expense — Utilities
Internet/Wi-Fi	Expense — Utilities
Routine repairs & maintenance	Expense — Operating
Pool chemicals & service	Expense — Operating
Landscaping & grounds supplies	Expense — Operating
OTA commissions	Expense — Marketing
Website, SEO, and paid advertising	Expense — Marketing
General liability & property insurance	Expense — Insurance
Workers' compensation insurance	Expense — Insurance
Lodging/occupancy tax remitted	Pass-through (not true revenue)
Capital reserve contribution	Reserve
Debt service (principal & interest)	Below NOI line

Net Operating Income (NOI) is calculated as total revenue minus all operating expense categories above the reserve and debt service lines. Debt service coverage (Part 9) is then calculated separately from NOI.

Appendix N: Extended Glossary

Term	Definition
Big rig	Industry shorthand for large Class A motorhomes or fifth-wheels typically requiring 50-amp service and wider/longer sites
DSCR	Debt Service Coverage Ratio — NOI divided by total annual debt payments, a key lender metric

Term	Definition
Full hookup	A site providing electric, water, and sewer connections
Lot rent	The recurring fee charged for a site, particularly in long-term or monthly contexts
NOI	Net Operating Income — revenue minus operating expenses, before debt service
Pedestal	The utility post at each site providing electrical (and sometimes water/cable) connections
Rally	An organized gathering of RV club or brand-affiliated owners, often booked as a group block
Seasonal site	A site rented for an extended but defined season (e.g., 3-6 months) rather than month-to-month indefinitely
Snowbird	A traveler, often retired, who relocates seasonally to warmer climates for winter months

Appendix O: Sample Maintenance Log Template

Date	Reported By	Location/Site #	Issue	Assigned To	Status	Resolved
__/__/__					Open / In Progress / Closed	
__/__/__					Open / In Progress / Closed	
__/__/__					Open / In Progress / Closed	

Keeping this log digital (even a simple shared spreadsheet, or a QR-code-based reporting system as discussed in Part 9) rather than on paper makes it far easier to spot recurring issues at the same site or system over time — a pattern that's easy to miss when each report lives on a separate sticky note.

Appendix P: 20 Questions to Ask Before You Buy

29. What is the trailing 36-month occupancy and ADR by lot type?
30. What is the septic or sewer system's design capacity versus actual peak-season flow?
31. Has the well water been tested in the last 12 months, and what were the results?
32. What percentage of sites are long-term tenants, and what tenancy rights have attached under state law?
33. Are there any open code violations or health department citations?

34. What OTA contracts exist, and what are the commission rates and renewal terms?
35. What is the age and condition of the electrical pedestals and main transformer capacity?
36. Is any portion of the property in a FEMA-designated floodplain or floodway?
37. What deferred maintenance exists, and is there a written list with cost estimates?
38. What is the current insurance loss history for the property?
39. Are all current employees at-will, and what obligations (if any) would transfer to a new owner?
40. What equipment and personal property are included in the sale, and is it itemized in the contract?
41. Is the zoning use legally conforming, or grandfathered/historically tolerated?
42. What is the true off-season occupancy and cash flow, not just the peak-season numbers?
43. Who owns the website domain, Google Business Profile, and review platform accounts, and how will they transfer?
44. Are there any pending local infrastructure or road projects that could affect access or traffic?
45. What is the property tax assessment history, and has it been appealed recently?
46. Are there abandoned RVs or unresolved tenant disputes on the property currently?
47. What capital expenditures has the current owner made in the last five years, and what is deferred?
48. Would the seller agree to a reasonable non-compete and a transition consulting period post-closing?

Appendix Q: Sample Job Description Outlines

General Manager

- Owns daily P&L performance, staffing decisions, and guest escalation resolution
- Sets and adjusts rate strategy within owner-approved guidelines
- Oversees maintenance prioritization and vendor relationships
- Reports monthly financial and occupancy performance to ownership

Maintenance Lead

- Executes preventive maintenance schedule across electrical, water, and grounds systems
- Triages and resolves guest-reported maintenance issues within an established response-time standard
- Maintains an accurate maintenance log and flags recurring issues to the General Manager

Front Desk / Guest Services

- Manages check-in/checkout flow, reservation system updates, and phone/email response
- Enforces posted rules consistently and escalates unresolved guest conflicts to the General Manager
- Captures guest contact information and encourages reviews per the marketing plan in Part 5

Appendix R: A Final Word

Running an RV park well is a constant balance between hospitality and infrastructure, between the guest standing at your front desk and the septic system you can't see. The operators who do this well for years aren't the ones who avoided every problem in this book — they're the ones who saw it coming, had a plan, and treated the unglamorous fundamentals as seriously as the guest-facing parts of the business.

If this book saved you from even one expensive surprise, it did its job.

5Star Camp — 5star.camp

Appendix S: Industry Associations & Ongoing Education

Beyond this book, ongoing education in this industry comes primarily from a few sources worth building a relationship with over time:

- State and national campground/RV park owner associations, which often provide regulatory updates, group purchasing, and regional benchmarking specific to your state's requirements.
- Regional tourism boards and convention/visitor bureaus, which can be valuable both for marketing partnerships and for early visibility into local infrastructure and development plans.
- Peer operator networks — informal relationships with other park owners in your region or comparable market type are often the fastest way to learn what's actually working right now, faster than any published source.
- Your own attorney, CPA, and insurance broker, treated as ongoing advisors rather than one-time transaction vendors — the regulatory and tax landscape in this industry shifts by state and by year, and a single onboarding conversation isn't enough to stay current.

Behind the desk, beneath the trees,
You greet the road-worn traveler's breeze.
With level pads and steady hands,
You build a home in changing lands.

Through morning mist and midnight calls,
You tend the grounds where comfort falls.
A safe retreat from highway miles,
Rewarded by the campfire smiles.

For every rig that pulls in tight,
You guide them home into the night.
An anchor in the great unknown—
You craft a life that rears a home.

5Star.Camp