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# Fuel or fireworks?

High gas prices put damper on July 4 displays



David Brock, right, co-owner of Poor Paul's Fireworks at 7318 Asheville Highway, explains a pyrotechnic to Will Lowry.

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Sharon Davis' Fourth of July fireworks displays are always loaded with firecrackers, bottle rockets and mortar shells.

But this year, she is planning to sacrifice visual splendor for something more practical.

Davis of Spartanburg stood in the Poor Paul's Fireworks store at 7318 Asheville Highway on Tuesday, contemplating whether to spend \$40 on the pyrotechnics in her hands or a full tank of gas for her pickup truck.

"We're just not going to buy that much this year," Davis said as she placed the items back on the shelf. "I would rather spend the money on gas than on fireworks."

Local fireworks vendors said they are seeing profits from Fourth of July holiday sales fizzle this year as customers are feeling the pressure from skyrocketing fuel prices and would rather spend money to top off their tanks than to see it burned in a blaze of glory.

"High gas prices have been affecting us just the way it has been hurting the economy as a whole," said David Brock, co-owner of Poor Paul's Fireworks. "People have been buying for years, but this year, they are buying less. It's a very unpredictable market right now."

The average price per gallon of regular gas in Spartanburg Tuesday was \$3.86, a full dollar higher than last year, according to the U.S. Energy Information Association.

Edward Patterson is a volunteer manager of the TNT Fireworks stand at Wal-Mart plaza in Boiling Springs, which helps raise money for Turning Point Church in Gaffney.

Patterson said rising gas prices have exacerbated his customers' economic concerns, as most are trying to stretch their monthly budgets.

"We've seen nowhere near the business we saw last year," Patterson said. "We did \$15,000 on the Fourth of July alone last year, and we just haven't seen it this year. Business is down, and I think fuel prices have a lot to do with it. They're stuck with the decision to shoot fireworks or buy gas so they can go to work."

Steven Anderson, youth pastor for Northeast Fellowship Church of God in Spartanburg, operates a TNT Fireworks stand in the parking lot of the Ingles grocery store at 2120 Highway 9.

He said his stand has made only about \$2,000 this week, which is weak in comparison to the same period in past years when the stand made double or triple that amount.

"The problem is that people are buying smaller products instead of the big finales," Anderson said. "We have seen prices on some of our items go up a little this year, but I think fuel prices are the main reason people aren't buying this year."

### **Drought also a factor**

Anderson said his customers are also hesitant because of the current severe drought conditions in Spartanburg County.

"We've had some questions about the drought," he said. "People are wondering if they will even be able to shoot the fireworks if they buy them."

John Johnson, regional manager for TNT Fireworks, is responsible for about 200 stands in North and South Carolina.

Johnson said he is remaining hopeful that his stands will be busy today and Friday.

"It's too early to tell, really," he said. "Last year, we did record sales on July 4, so you never know. What I'm hearing is that a lot of people are putting their travel plans on hold and celebrating at home. If that's the

case, which I believe it is, then we'll be fine. Fireworks are a tradition for people, and I think most will find a way to buy them, no matter what, if they really want to."

Brock said one way customers can save money on fireworks displays this Fourth of July is to pool celebrations with friends and family.

"You get a much better show, and you split the cost at the same time," he said.

Brock also said customers with concerns about dry conditions can get permission to hold their fireworks celebrations in large parking lots or paved areas, shoot them over ponds and lakes, and water their yards to lower the risk of fires.

"It looks like it's going to be a tough year for fireworks, but hopefully people will stick to the tradition and find a way to celebrate," Brock said. "We've got our fingers crossed."