

Businesses keep rates reasonable during storm

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Supply and demand. The more a consumer needs something, the more businesses charge for it.

But the basic business rule of supply and demand is sometimes suspended during a state of emergency, which the state of Georgia has been under since 2 p.m. Tuesday.

Most local retailers and consumers report fair pricing practices for goods and services during the past three days.

Many area businesses report having been besieged by hurricane evacuees, some as early as Monday morning, and hotels and motels are bearing the brunt of the consumer demand. The nearly 6,000 hotel and motel rooms in the Augusta area were booked by Wednesday afternoon, said Rebecca Rogers, communications director for the Augusta Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Augusta Chronicle randomly polled 10 area hotels. None of the hotels had exceeded its normal price ranges for a nonholiday weeknight, although several appeared to be leasing at the higher end of those ranges. Some hotels also were charging extra for each additional person staying in a room and for pets.

Because Georgia is in a state of emergency, anyone who has unnecessarily raised prices during that time could be investigated by the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs and could face fines between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per transaction, said spokesman Bill Cloud.

"People can raise their prices, but if it's more than a reasonable amount, my guess is that it's probably not justified," Mr. Cloud said.

More people report lowering prices as opposed to raising them.

"We are trying to accommodate everybody for the same price we charge on a regular day," said G.B. Sharma, owner of the Holiday Inn Express on 15th Street. "We are entitled to charge for extra people to a room, but a lot of times we aren't."

And it has been difficult to turn people away, hoteliers say.

"People are coming to us saying they have nowhere to stay -- small children and families," said Chandra Purohit, owner of the Travelodge on Washington Road and Best Western on Belair Road. "We just wanted to help them out."

Mrs. Purohit has created semi-shelters in the banquet rooms and lobbies of her two hotels and is offering them free of charge to stranded evacuees.

Shoney's Inn Manager Ann Cain is doing the same thing, but because she is providing beds, she is charging a single-room rate of about \$42 for a family of seven.

Anyone who believes they have been the victim of illegal price gouging can call the Office of Consumer Affairs at (800) 869-1123.

Barbara and Jim McMillan, their daughter and four grandchildren have set up home in one of Shoney's banquet rooms. They are paying \$42 a night for those accommodations.

"We certainly appreciate their hospitality," Mrs. McMillan said of her makeshift accommodations. "Ann went way out of her way."