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Severe heat curbs daytime carriage rides

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Wednesday, July 4, 2012 12:10 am

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Blistering heat has burned up profits for the horse-drawn carriage industry in downtown St. Louis, which has seen its hours curtailed since temperatures began to soar.

Faced with a record-setting heat wave, the St. Louis Metropolitan Taxicab Commission last week ordered horse-drawn carriage companies to keep their buggies off the streets until 8 p.m.. The order remains in effect through the end of the Fourth of July holiday week.

Drivers for St. Louis Carriage Co. have worked shorter shifts and earned fewer dollars than a typical holiday week.

“It’s a bummer,” said Jenny Holzum, business manager at St. Louis Carriage Co. “Because there’s a lot of people in town. And a lot of the money that we make on the Fourth of July is before the fireworks during the day when the people are out rummaging through the city.

“Now we’re going to be able to get out at 8 o’clock and streets are going to be closed and traffic is going to be horrendous.”

Holzum said the local carriage company understands the heat order. Fans buzzed throughout the barn near Busch Stadium, where St. Louis Carriage keeps 14 draft horses and three ponies. Holzum led horses outside the stable and doused them with a hose.

The carriage season usually kicks off with spring break, followed by a lull until school is out for summer.

“Summer time is our season,” Holzum said. “We’ve been doing fairly decent considering we are getting out at 8 o’clock at night. There are people out there to ride.”

Tuesday’s high of 101 marked the sixth consecutive day of temperatures at or above 100 degrees. That or worse has been recorded only six other times in St. Louis, the most recent having been a heat wave in July 1966 that also logged six straight triple-digit days. The local record is 13 straight days in 1936, when 479 people died in a prolonged heat wave that included 37 days at or above 100.

The high Tuesday tied the record for July 3 set in 1934 during another grim heat wave.

The National Weather Service says high temperatures will be around 105 today through Saturday, with a chance for a break next week. Jon Carney, a meteorologist with the service office in Weldon Spring, said computer models indicate a cool front Monday that may bring rain and high temperatures only in the upper 80s by Tuesday.

“There’s a chance for a shift in the pattern that would break this heat wave,” Carney said.

Pam Walker, the city’s health director and a longtime horse owner, said she approached the taxicab commission about restricting carriage rides during times of extreme heat.

“When you’re in downtown St. Louis and this pavement gets hot, the bricks get hot. It’s really a stressful condition for any animal being outside,” Walker said.

Horses exposed to continuous heat can contract colic and heat exhaustion just like humans, she said.

For their part, the carriage companies have properly cared for their horses, Walker said. But she acknowledges that it can be “off-putting” to some to see horses pulling carriages on city streets on a hot day.

On a typical day, St. Louis Carriage would have two carriages on the streets by noon. All of the carriages are usually out of the barn by 5 p.m.

“We’re all about the horses,” Holzum said. “Anybody who works here and most of our drivers are just horse people. We’ll go out there and try to make our money. It hasn’t been too painful yet because we still are making a little money.

“We’re not making the money we typically could be making, but it’s enough to survive on.”

So far, the taxicab commission has made one exception to the carriage restriction. Last weekend, the commission permitted a carriage to shuttle a wedding party between the Hyatt Regency hotel and the Old Cathedral, said Ron Klein, the commission’s executive director.

Klein, who once was in charge of the St. Louis Police Department’s mounted patrol, said the commission has issued similar orders in the past. He said it is mostly driven by the perception that a draft horse working in the heat is cruel.

Klein said a veterinarian told him that draft horses have been bred to do this type of work, and should be all right if they have plenty of water. St. Louis Carriage provides water for horses during each shift, including five-gallon buckets on the carriage.

Carriage driver Lauren Bargiel, 21, said she has seen her sales drop by about one-third since last week’s order. Drivers work for tips and commission of the carriage-ride sales.

A carriage tour ranges from \$30 for 15 minutes for the first two passengers to \$90 for an hour, according to company website.

To Bargiel, the need to keep horses cool and safe during intense heat is more than a matter of perception.

“It’s definitely too hot,” she said. The horses “do much better in the freezing cold than in the heat.”

Tim O’Neil of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.