

GATES

From Page 1

Rhode Island Democrat. Clinton and her aides have scoffed at pundits' suggestions that she might take the job. In numerous interviews, Clinton herself has flatly ruled out another bid for the presidency and suggested that she intends to retire from government service after her stint as secretary of state.

Flournoy and Reed are also considered long shots, with neither regarded as having enough experience in managing such a large bureaucracy. While Reed, a former Army ranger, is considered a favored Democratic talking head on defense matters, he also is the father of a toddler daughter and is said to prefer the relatively quiet life of a local politician.

His pick would also mean leaving a Senate seat vulnerable at a time when Democrats hold a slim majority.

As 2011 approaches, it is likely that other suggestions will be made, including retired military officers.

Morrell dismissed talk of who the next defense chief would be, calling it a "silly Washington parlor game."

Gates, 66, has been the Pentagon's top civilian boss since 2006 when he took the reins from Donald Rumsfeld. With Rumsfeld's popularity on Capitol Hill at an all-time low and violence in Iraq skyrocketing,

Gates easily gained the reputation as a likable pragmatist and nonpartisan.

When President Barack Obama took office in 2009, Gates was asked to stay on. The move was intended to maintain stability at a time of two wars and made good on Obama's promise of bipartisanship; Gates is a Republican.

Gates has since earned the nickname "Yoda" by his colleagues at the White House because of his experience managing large and complex organizations. He has served under eight presidents, including as director of the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1990s.

While Gates had agreed to work for Obama through at least this year, he has been open about his desire to return to civilian life in his home state of Washington. But he has not said when he might consider retiring.

In his interview with Foreign Policy magazine, Gates said for the first time that leaving in 2011 makes sense. It would give him time to oversee the major offensive under way in Afghanistan but bow out before the 2012 presidential elections.

"I just think this is not the kind of job you want to fill in the spring of a presidential election," he said. "So I think sometime in 2011 sounds pretty good."

White House spokesman Bill Burton, traveling with Obama, said it was "not surprising to him see discussing his plans to move on." Burton said Gates had served with distinction, and he declined to comment on Gates' future or who might succeed him.

CAMP

From Page 1

take us into early October, so it would be close to the end of the fee season," he said, referring to paid admission for park usage.

The upgrade will continue on schedule along with cleanup, Ledbetter said. Nebraska Tailwaters Campground, another site sustaining major storm damage, will remain open for campers.

Cottonwood Campground may remain closed until spring, although a final decision has not been made, Ledbetter said.

"Typically, in the past, we let (Cottonwood) open for free camping during the winter, but at this point in time we're not sure if we will do that this year," he said. "We want to give ourselves plenty of time to get things done."

While the Cottonwood Campground remains closed, the day-use area could open in two weeks if clean-up moves quickly, Ledbetter said.

Corps staff from the Fort Randall Project and other Corps offices are assisting in the cleanup. Minor damage occurred to project buildings, and debris is being removed near the visitor center.

Workers completed clean-up of the Nebraska Tailwaters campground Monday, allowing the opening of tent camping areas, he said. Some clean-up of branches remains in the west end.

The Corps had sought to open Cottonwood Campground by Friday, in time for Riverboat

Days, said Dave Becker, operations project manager for Gavins Point Dam.

"But the more we counted the trees that had to be taken down and the limbs that were hanging, and after assessing the damage to the structures, we made the decision (Monday) that we just couldn't open it back up this year," he said.

The Corps faces at least three more weeks of clean-up, Becker said. Most of the tree work will hopefully be completed by late September, he said.

The Corps also must repair a damaged comfort station and replace a destroyed fee booth, Becker said. The Corps may need to contract out the construction of a fee booth, he said.

The Frisbee golf course needs repairs, including new goals, Becker said. "We have a lot fewer tree hazards on that golf course. A couple of holes look a lot different," he said.

The tree trimming and removal, along with stump grinding, will take much longer than first estimated, Ledbetter said.

He said the Aug. 8 storm was the worst to hit the campgrounds in the 10 years he has worked in his current position.

"We had some strong winds that have taken big branches, but not this extensive," he said.

Becker received similar reports. "I have talked to folks around here, and they said it was the worst since 1985," he said.

Weather radio alerts and park rangers warned campers of the impending winds. Campers went to the cement campground comfort stations for protection or stayed inside their recreational vehicles (RVs).

The storm produced no fatalities, and the lone injury was sustained by a fee attendant working in the booth at the time, Ledbetter said. The attendant was taken to Avera Sacred Heart Hospital in Yankton, and was treated and released.

Ledbetter commended the emergency crews and volunteers for their rapid response to the storm and its aftermath. The outcome could have been much worse, he said.

Becker noted the campgrounds were at a fraction of their usual occupancy when the storm hit on a Sunday night.

Cottonwood has 75 campsites and Nebraska Tailwaters has 42 sites. During the camping season of mid-April to mid-October, the campgrounds are normally more than 80 percent full and completely booked on weekends.

"The winds hit as the campgrounds were emptying," Becker said. "There were an estimated 100 people in the Cottonwood campground and 40 in Nebraska Tailwaters at the time."

Ledbetter believes that final decisions will be made in late September or early October on whether to close Cottonwood Campground for the winter.

The Corps will inform the public of clean-up progress and any further decisions as soon as they are made, Becker said.

"We want to make sure that we keep people up to date on the state of our facilities," he said.

Campers with existing reservations can contact the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at (402) 667-2546 for further information.

Homebuilder Confidence Sinks For 3rd Month

BY ALAN ZIBEL
AP Real Estate Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Homebuilder confidence dropped for the third straight month in August as the struggling economy and a flood of cheap foreclosed properties kept people from buying new homes.

The National Association of Home Builders said its monthly index of builders' sentiment about the housing market fell to 13, the lowest reading since March 2009. The index is adjusted for seasonal factors.

Readings below 50 indicate negative sentiment about the market. The last time the index was above 50 was in April 2006.

Fewer people are buying new homes, even though prices have stabilized in the past year and those who have good credit can qualify for the lowest mortgage rates in decades. The market is struggling because jobs are scarce and credit is tight. And many analysts predict home prices are likely to drop again in the fall.

"Buyers just aren't stepping up to the plate," wrote Mike Larson, real estate analyst with Weiss Research. "Unless and until the job market improves, we are simply not going to get any traction in the housing market."

Another key reading of housing activity will come Tuesday when the Commerce Department releases its report on home construction in July. Construction plunged in June to the lowest level since October.

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