

Hofer, A Builder Of State Parks System, Seems Ready – Almost – To Call It A Day

BY BOB MERCER
State Capitol Bureau

PIERRE – There's no formal retirement announcement yet. But something seemed afout in recent months. Doug Hofer no longer attended meetings of the state Game, Fish and Parks Commission. For 30 years he had been a constant presence.

The official story is Hofer, the long-time director for the state Division of Parks and Recreation, is simply taking an extended break to use paid leave he's accumulated.

Both he and new GFP Secretary Kelly Hepler said Hofer would return for the 2016 session of the Legislature that opens Jan. 12. The session is scheduled for 38 working days that wrap up March 29.

He began working for South Dakota's state parks system in the summer of 1970 as a seasonal employee.

He joined GFP as a full-time employee in March 1972. He became parks director on an acting – temporary – basis in September 1985.

He's hasn't left. But he turned age 65 in June 2014. Bob Schneider, his long-time deputy, now carries the title of acting director while



Hofer

Hofer is away. Schneider said by email Friday that he thinks Hofer will be around to see the openings of the new visitor center being built at Custer State Park and the visitor center planned for Good Earth State Park at the Blood Run site south of Sioux Falls.

Hofer pretty much spilled the beans.

"I do hope to work part time on GESP and CSP projects after I retire this spring and see them to finish line," he wrote in an email Dec. 16 in response to a reporter's question.

Secretary Hepler helped cut through the mystery too.

"Doug is closing in on his retirement date sometime this coming spring after session and he wanted to have more time to hunt and do some farming this fall," Hepler replied in a Dec. 16 email.

"So Doug is working on a part time basis on some major projects such as Good Earth until January when he will return to full time work

and resume his role as director. We put Bob in an acting status in the interim," Hepler continued.

For three full decades now as the division's director, he's been at the center of transforming South Dakota's system of state parks and recreation areas into an outdoors wonder.

He's served in the director's chair during six governorships – Bill Janklow, George S. Mickelson, Walter Dale Miller, Janklow again, Mike Rounds and Dennis Daugaard – and under five different GFP secretaries in Jeff Stingley, Dick Beringson, John Cooper, Jeff Vonk and Hepler.

South Dakota had 13 state parks designated in state law when he began and will have 13 when he leaves.

During his time as director, the Legislature agreed to change Hiddenwood in Walworth County from a state park to a recreation area in 1997 and designated Good Earth at Blood Run as a state park in 2013.

But there's been substantial expansion. There are now 50 state recreation areas and state lakeside use areas where valid park licenses are required.

In 1994 the Legislature and the parks division created the George S. Mickelson Trail in the Black Hills using an old railroad route in honor

of the late governor who died in the 1993 state-plane crash.

During the past decade GFP has come to receive lands in beautiful Spearfish Canyon as well for recreational uses such as hiking, trout fishing and sightseeing.

Many of the areas along the Missouri River came into the state's ownership and GFP's management through the federal Water Resources Development Act passed by Congress in 1999.

Tom Daschle was the Democratic leader of the U.S. Senate and Janklow, a Republican, was serving his fourth term as governor.

Missouri River water levels – sometimes too low to use many of the public boat ramps and sometimes flooding out campgrounds and homes – bedeviled GFP repeatedly during Hofer's career.

Custer State Park survived forest fires during Mickelson's governorship and pine beetle infestations most recently under Rounds and Daugaard.

Along the way Hofer helped steer Custer State Park's management through a controversial change to a professional lodging company that has made major improvements.

The annual fall roundup of the park's buffalo is now an international

tourism event.

Next up at the park is the new visitor center, further improvements at existing facilities and what is described as a world-class documentary about the park's bison.

On the other end of South Dakota, Good Earth State Park is a joint project with Iowa to protect and historically develop a centuries-old tribal meeting grounds.

Likewise, development issues largely tied to the Sturgis motorcycle rally gradually have been resolved around Bear Butte State Park, a religiously significant mountain for American Indian people, at the eastern edge of the Black Hills.

He's worked closely with the non-profit South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation on raising donations and making land transfers for key projects.

His division also has been working to connect the Mickelson Trail to Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

All signs point to Hofer next spring wrapping up a professional career where he's had no other employer. Maybe.

"Still working on that part of the plan," he replied by email to a reporter's follow-up question. "Not sure yet."

Downtown

From Page 1A

they'd do for you or what's available to rent," she said. "One of the aspects of my business is the marketing part of my business where I've been doing marketing for clients for the past four years. ... I saw the need in the downtown area for the marketing. The tradeoff (between) having to remodel and get this all ready and the strip-malls that were a little more move-in friendly ... was that I felt like downtown needed some excitement and something new."

CURRENT BUSINESS CLIMATE

Yankton City Manager Amy Nelson told the *Press & Dakotan* that more can be done to help improve the downtown district, but she already sees some businesses working towards this goal.

"I think we all could do a better job to make downtown a more vibrant place," Nelson said. "My assessment, however, is that the people downtown are already doing that. There are a lot of professional services that you may not, as a passerby, realize that are going on. Just because someone isn't walking in, purchasing something and leaving a store doesn't necessarily mean commerce isn't happening."

Bernie Hunhoff, District 18 state senator and co-founder of *South Dakota Magazine*, told the *Press & Dakotan* that he's seen many retail outlets in downtown overcome challenges that have forced others out.

A NEED FOR REVITALIZATION

Yankton native and current

mayor of Sioux Falls Mike Huether told the *Press & Dakotan* that downtown areas ultimately drive the city.

"To me, any small town, large town or major metropolitan city, the heartbeat of that town or that city is its downtown," Huether said. "If that beat isn't pumping strong, that is not a good sign for anybody or any community. Yankton's heartbeat is not pumping as strong as I think that it can be."

Nelson said revitalization is needed to help keep driving the local economy.

"It is the heart of our community," she said. "It's an economic engine that we don't think about necessarily. Our local economy isn't just about manufacturing; it isn't just about tourism, although downtown can be a part of tourism; but it's also about commerce, and downtown can really be an exciting neighborhood. I think people are turning their focus — and this is all over the country — back into the core of their community."

WEAKNESSES

Knief said there's a need for additional business in downtown.

"I think there is a need when people are out shopping, they need places to eat, they need places to drink, they need places to have entertainment, they need places to shop," she said. "They can't just have a handful of stores."

Another weakness she sensed is a push to have some buildings in downtown that are considered fully residential.

"I just think it's really sad that we have beautiful residential places downtown on the first floor of some of these buildings," she said. "When you put housing on the first level, you kind of take away from the aspect that you could either have a coffee shop, a book store or something that people can walk in and out of. I really would like it if Yankton would do something about trying to keep residential to the upper levels of the floors so the people who are living there would have more stuff to do when they're walking on the street."

Hunhoff said the downtown area ultimately needs to diversify its business climate in order to revitalize itself.

"Those retailers are still the engine for downtown, and we need to help them and work with them to create more traffic downtown," he said. "But I think we also can't expect retail to do it all by itself."

He added that one of the downtown district's other weaknesses stems from how business is done today.

"The weaknesses are just weaknesses inherent to smaller cities these days," he said. "Most of the people spend their money online or with big-box stores."

STRENGTHS

Huether said one of the key strengths downtown Yankton has is its location.

"I love the location," he said. "It's got access to Nebraska. It's got access to major roads coming in and out of Yankton. You go south, you go to Nebraska. You go east, you go towards Vermillion and USD. You go north and you get all of those communities to the north on a major highway. And you go west, you've got one of the most robust tourist attractions in South Dakota along with a very vibrant ag economy."

He added the district's history and utilization of a major waterway also add depth.

"I love the historic feel and existing façade of downtown," he said. "I think that could play to its strength in a big way. Whenever you can get a community that has a downtown that has water either going through it or running right beside it, it's a monster win towards your chances of success."

Nelson said downtown currently boasts a wide array of activities for people to take part in every day.

"If you want to have fun on a Friday or Saturday night — or even a weeknight — there's plenty of venues to do that downtown, and I'm not just talking about the liquor establishments," she said. "There's the (Dakota) Theater ... We also have a huge park lining our downtown, so there's opportunities to be entertained

through baseball games that happen in Riverside Park. You can spend the evening in the park or walking the bridge. You can use it for recreation. We have a lot of assets a lot of communities don't have to build on."

Knief said there's a lot of enthusiasm amongst business owners in downtown Yankton.

"I know many (business owners) having been a shopper down here since I moved here eight years ago," she said. "Now that I've gotten to know them business owner-to-business owner, I think the enthusiasm people have for bringing neat and unique items to downtown and seeing the historic aspect of downtown be celebrated is (positive)."

SHORT TERM HELP

Huether said current efforts, such as Onward Yankton, construction on Meridian Plaza and the recently passed façade grant,

are welcome developments.

"You have to start somewhere," he said. "I am pleased that some of the conversation is starting to focus more and more on downtown. Whenever you play a basketball game, once you make that first basket, then that big three-pointer, then all of a sudden you score some points, you build some momentum and some confidence. Then you can tackle even bigger things. I think Yankton is early on in the first quarter towards scoring some points and rebuilding their downtown."

Hunhoff said these programs are recognition that downtown needs a boost forward.

"The thing that's new right now is a recognition from the downtown community — and the community as a whole — that we need to really step up our game and offer a quality to young people, young professionals and young families in general that gives them the community that they want to live in," he said. "We need

to make this a really special place with a high quality of life, and I think a lot of people are recognizing that if we're going to do that, it has to begin with downtown."

Nelson said she's hopeful that such projects will also help serve as inspiration for others.

"I hope it serves as a catalyst for other people when they see things changing maybe they want to change something, too," she said. "If somebody utilizes the downtown façade grant and they improve their building with that, I think that incentivizes other people to say, 'Hey, I'd like to utilize that fund, too. I'd like to do something with my building as well.'"

Next Monday, the *Press & Dakotan* will present a look at the future of downtown Yankton.

Follow @RobNielsen-PandD on Twitter.

Merry Christmas
from Lewis & Clark
Marina & Grill

A real joy of the holiday season is our chance to say thank you to friends and customers for another great year!

Thank You for your Patronage
Wishing you a
Blessed New Year
Chris, Karen, Heath & Staff

EVERYTHING MUST GO!
Final Week before Christmas

Going out of Business

Open to the public

LIQUIDATION

SALE

EVERY LOCATION – ALL STORES

\$0.99
Scarves
Housewares
Markdowns

\$1.29
Jewelry, Toys
Books, Socks,
Gloves & More!

\$9.99
Handbags
\$7.99
Sweaters

FINAL SHIPMENTS HAVE ARRIVED
INCLUDING CHRISTMAS DECOR!

while Supplies last (including fixtures)

Schweser's
www.schwesersstores.com
Fashion for Less

*few exclusions apply
*ticketed price may not have resulted in sales

Every Location – All Stores

Select
Fixtures
For
Sale!

Final shipments
have arrived! Gloves
Socks, Toys, & more!

NEW
MARKDOWNS

up to
95%
OFF
OFF OF THE
TICKETED PRICE