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Hutchinson County

# Longtime Commission Member Steps Down

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF  
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OLIVET — A Freeman businessman who has served on the Hutchinson County Commission for two decades has resigned his seat following last week's primary loss.



Stern

Gillas Stern lost to challenger Steven Friesen, also of Freeman, by a 198-83 margin in the Republican primary for District 2 commissioner. No Democrats or independents filed for the office, so Friesen will automatically assume office in January.

Last week's primary election was held June 5. Stern submitted his resignation, effective June 6, at the June 7 commission meeting, which also canvassed the election results.

Stern has served as a Hutchinson County commissioner since January 1993, according to Hutchinson County Auditor Jeannie Simonsen.

Stern told the *Press & Dakotan* on Tuesday afternoon that his decision to leave office immediately was not a knee-jerk reaction to his election loss.

"This is not a case of sour grapes," he said when contacted at his Stern Oil office in Freeman.

Rather, Stern said he acted in what he saw as the county's best interests — the commissioners appointed Friesen as his immediate replacement — rather than remain in office for the rest of the year.

"I would be in office another six months — almost seven full months — and I would be a lame duck," Stern said. "I would be in no-win situations."

He pointed in particular to the upcoming labor negotiations with unionized county employees and to anticipated tough budget decisions later this year.

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RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

Niobrara State Park, a 1,260-acre park in Knox County, Neb., welcomes visitors for a wide variety of scenery, recreation and educational programs. The park saw a drop in visitor numbers last year when the public mistakenly thought the site was closed or inaccessible because of the 2011 Missouri River flooding. However, the visitor numbers soared this spring, and park officials are optimistic for a banner tourism season.

# Niobrara State Park Sees Strong Start To Season

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF  
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NIOBRARA, Neb. — For Utah resident Dale Venuto, attending the College World Series in Omaha has become an annual ritual. But after spending time at Niobrara State Park (NSP) on his current visit, he may have found another yearly tradition.

"I grew up in Omaha, and I was back last weekend for a high school reunion," he said. "I was looking for a way to kill time between the reunion and the College World Series coming up this weekend."

Rather than spend this week in Omaha, Venuto decided to explore Nebraska's state parks. In the process, he fell in love with Niobrara State Park.

"This is a nice place, and it has a great campsite. I also like the view of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers," he said. "It's beautiful here. You can see the fireflies and the clear stars."

Those words are music to the ears of Niobrara

## OUR TOWNS

### Knox County

State Park superintendent Mark Rettig as the park seeks to rebound from the historic Missouri River flooding of 2011.

The 1,260-acre park was not flooded and remained open every day, offering most of its services. However, the park suffered from negative flood-related publicity, and stretches of Nebraska Highway 12 were closed to the east and west of Niobrara. Many people mistakenly thought the park was closed or inaccessible — neither one true — and stayed away. The park also took a hit from the loss of flooded residents from neighboring Lazy River Acres along with recreationists who stayed away from the river.

However, 2012 brings new hope and has produced strong visitor numbers so far, Rettig said.

"It's going really well. We have had a real good turnout with the (recreational vehicle) campgrounds," he said. "The big thing this year for us is the warm weather. We had some really nice weather during February and March. I think it got everybody's enthusiasm perked up, and it got them into the park earlier."

As a result, Rettig expects a banner season. The park's beauty speaks for itself, he said.

"We have great scenery and are located at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri River," he said. "We're one of the best kept secrets."

Niobrara State Park remains extremely family friendly, Rettig said. He noted the park's 14 miles of hiking and biking trails, horseback trail rides, swimming pool (offering swim lessons and water aerobics this year), bird watching, wildlife, fishing, picnicking and camping for tents, cabins, recreational vehicles.

"We just had people in here for bird watching,

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# Open House For ASHH Surgical Center Planned For Thursday

BY NATHAN JOHNSON  
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Having just completed its new surgical center, Avera Sacred Heart Hospital (ASHH) is hoping the public will take the opportunity to view the renovated facility Thursday.

An open house with tours will be held for the approximately 20,000-square-foot, \$8 million surgical center from 5-7 p.m. Thursday. It is one of the larger projects ASHH has undertaken in the last 20 years.

"Since most people do not get to see a modern, state-of-the-art operating room, or they may not remember it if they were a patient, we wanted to provide an opportunity for the public to see what one looks like," said Doug Ekeren, vice president of planning and development for ASHH. "This includes modern equipment like video integration and monitoring systems."

The renovation of the surgical center on the first floor of the



COURTESY PHOTO

This welcome room is just part of the new surgery area at Avera Sacred Heart Hospital. An open house and tours of the new additions will be offered to the public Thursday.

hospital includes six operation rooms, 14 pre- and post-operation rooms and a welcome area.

Done in phases, the last stage was not expected to be complete until July. However, the final areas of the renovation were opened approximately 10 days

ago. The only piece that remains is some storage shelving.

"We worked with our general contractor on the project, Welf Construction, on the timeline," Ekeren said. "Cooperation of

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# New Programs To Begin At LCRA

BY DEREK BARTOS  
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In an effort to attract more park visitors during the week, the park naturalists at the Lewis & Clark Recreation Area (LCRA) have announced two new series of free programs being held this summer.

Open to all ages, "Wildlife Wednesdays" and "Through the Woods Thursdays" will give visitors the opportunity to learn and experience nature, according to Park Naturalist Kayla Loecker.

"We're just trying really hard to get those people in town who are looking for something to do to come out here," she said. "A lot of people have never been out here even though they've lived here a long time."

"Wildlife Wednesdays" will feature hour-long programs at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. at the Lewis & Clark Amphitheater to teach visitors about

nature-related items and different types of animals, such as the bison being featured in today's (Wednesday) program, Tatanka "Giver of Life."

"We actually have a bison crate that has all the parts of a buffalo, and they'll get to see and touch those different parts and learn how they were used," Loecker said.

"Through the Woods Thursdays" will be similar to the Wednesday programs, she said, but instead of a "sit-and-learn program," visitors will participate in a hike at the Gavins Nature Trail.

"They'll be learning about all sorts of topics," Loecker said. "This Thursday will be the Lewis & Clark Walk Through History Hike, so we're going to learn about the expedition and about the different plants and animals they found along the way, and the people they met while they were in this area."

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# Two Found Dead In Charles Mix Cabin Boat

From P&D Staff Reports

LAKE ANDES — Two people were discovered dead in a cabin boat at a Charles Mix County recreation area Tuesday.

According to a press release from the Charles Mix County Sheriff's Department, a 61-year-old male and 63-year-old female,

along with their two dogs, were discovered deceased at 10 a.m. Tuesday in a large cabin boat located at Dock 44 Marina Bay by the Snake Creek Recreational Area. The cause of death appeared to be carbon monoxide poisoning.

The names of the victims were not released pending

notification of the next of kin, the press release said.

The incident is being investigated by the sheriff's office, the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks.



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