

Shudak

From A1

One area Shudak wants changed is to increase trans-

parency and community outreach. She would like to see more community involvement and town hall gatherings where community members can provide input about proj-

ects the city is taking on or considering.

As for challenges Shudak foresees, she said going up against Walsh will likely be difficult due to his tenure in

office.

“He’s respected by many in the community, and so I think it will be a challenge but it’s one I’m up for,” Shudak said. “I just want to provide our cit-

izens an opportunity to go in a different path, if they want to.”

Despite expecting obstacles, Shudak said she’s excited to engage with community members.

“I am always excited to get out and talk to people,” Shudak said. “So I’m really excited just about the enthusiasm prior to me announcing of people wanting to get involved.”

Supervisors

From A1

Jorgensen’s interest in selling the property was reported by The Nonpareil on Tuesday afternoon, based on email records.

“As a county government we are not in the business of running a ski facility,” Jorgensen said in an email to County Attorney Matt Wilber on April 25.

Jorgensen told Wilber that “there are currently at least three of us who would like to see Mt. Crescent put on the (Board of Supervisors) agenda and sold.”

Kate Gerber, public relations manager for Pottawattamie County, told The Nonpareil that the county has long-term plans to continue renovating and improving Crescent Hill.

County’s purchase of Mt. Crescent aims to conserve Loess Hills

The county went into the ski hill operations business after purchasing the former Mt. Crescent Ski Area from private ownership on Dec. 30, 2021. Pottawattamie Conservation took over control of the property, reserving two-thirds of the 106 acres for conservation purposes.

The county paid \$3.5 million for the property, including a \$1.4 million grant from the Iowa West Foundation. The remainder came from federal American Rescue Plan Act funding.

Pottawattamie Conservation saw the opportunity to buy the ski hill as a way to add onto its adjacent Hitchcock Nature Center, and it changed the name of the facility to reflect its inclusion into the nature preserve.

Western Iowa’s Loess Hills are one of two places in the world where silt piled up on the side of a river to create the area’s unique land formation. The other site, along the Yellow River in China, has become degraded — increasing the global significance of Iowa’s Loess Hills.

“It’s in all of our interest to keep that area pristine,” Jorgensen told The Nonpareil in an interview. “How you develop it, and how best we develop it and the cost involved, I think it could be done in a better fashion at a private enterprise level.”

During its first year, Pottawattamie Conservation operated the ski lift on the taxpayer’s dime, Executive Director Jeff Franco said in an interview with The Nonpareil last month. Those dollars — along with an additional \$350,000 — were refunded to the county’s coffers. Another payment this year is expected to contribute toward repaying the initial investment.

Franco could not be immediately reached for comment Tuesday afternoon.

“Typically, with a loan like that, you’d have some time to pay that back,” Franco said in an interview during a May 31 open house. “We’re going to pay that back as quickly as we possibly can.”



SCOTT STEWART, THE NONPAREIL

Jeff Franco, deputy director of Pottawattamie County Conservation, delivers remarks during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Heartwood Pavilion at Hitchcock Nature Center in Honey Creek on Thursday, May 16, 2024.

The open house included the announcement of a master plan for the site, under development since October 2023, calling for several new amenities. The plans, which would be implemented by soliciting private donations, would keep the property generating revenue toward the goal of fully repaying the county for buying the property.

Public feedback on the master plan is being accepted through the end of the month at explorecrescenthill.com, which also details the proposals.

Crescent Hill at Hitchcock is a county enterprise fund, allowing it to operate a business in order to avoid relying upon taxpayers for ongoing funding.

“We cannot rely upon taxpayers,” Franco said on May 31. “This operation needs to run clean and efficiently. We need to make sure our customers are happy. They will dictate the future for us.”

County would need conservation board’s OK to sell Crescent Hill

On April 28, Wilber provided county supervisors with a written opinion as to whether they could sell or lease Crescent Hill at Hitchcock: “The short answer is that the Board of Supervisors does not have the legal authority to consider any disposition of the property,” the county attorney concluded.

Wilber wrote that “the property is not the Board’s to sell.”

“While the land is technically titled in the name of Pottawattamie County, Iowa Code 350.4 gives ‘custody, control and management’ of the property to the county conservation board,” Wilber said, noting that an Iowa Attorney General’s Office opinion explicitly states that a county board of supervisors cannot sell county park lands without a deter-



JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

Pottawattamie County Conservation Executive Director Jeff Franco, left, chats with Maintenance Technician “Snowhunter Dan” Borgaila at the base of Mt. Crescent Ski Area, which was recently rebanded to Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, on Friday, Feb. 28.

mination from the county conservation board that the land is no longer needed as a park.

Wilber also observed that any attempt to sell the property would require communication with the federal government as well as the Iowa West Foundation, as they contributed grant funding for the initial purchase. He warned that a sale could jeopardize future grants from Iowa West.

“This may not be a strictly legal impediment, but a failure to honor the spirit of an agreement from such an important part to Pottawattamie County would be disappointing at best and could cause significant financial harm to the County at worst,” Wilber wrote.

Brenda Mainwaring, president and CEO of Iowa West, said in a statement through a spokesperson that the foundation reviewed the terms of the grant with Pottawattamie County staff in January — after the email records given to The Nonpareil indicate at least an initial discussion of selling the ski hill to Steven Enterprises had taken place.

“That review included a reminder that the primary expected outcome of the award was the conservation of 106.5 acres of Loess Hills in alignment with the Hitchcock Nature Center,” Main-

waring said in the statement. “A key expectation was that the County acquire and own the land. If the County sold or transferred ownership of the land that would violate the purpose of the agreement, which could trigger a requirement for repayment of the Iowa West Foundation grant.”

Wilber outlined other potential legal concerns with selling the ski hill, including that doing so would invite a lawsuit alleging a violation of the “public trust doctrine,” which protects public lands and natural resources. Wilber noted that the ski hill is part of the globally significant Loess Hills, which could further invite such litigation, even if he said the Iowa Supreme Court has been hesitant to expand the doctrine.

The bottom line, though, according to Wilber’s legal analysis, is that the land could not be sold without the explicit support of the Pottawattamie Conservation Board of Directors.

A representative of the conservation board was not immediately available for comment Tuesday afternoon.

Steven Enterprises operates a variety of businesses across the country, although largely based in Kansas, including car dealerships, the Wichita Thunder hockey team, trampoline parks,

auto insurance and financing, real estate development, a steakhouse and a billboard company.

The Nonpareil reached out to Steven Enterprises for comment, leaving a message with Eddy’s Toyota of Wichita with the Brandon Steven Motors Automotive Group — the company’s listed number. The message was not immediately returned Tuesday.

Records unclear whether sale remains under active consideration

An email dated Dec. 10, 2024, from Jorgensen to Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors Chairman Scott Belt references a scheduled meeting that week with Steven. Jorgensen says he is “very well to do and has the resources to make things happen for Mt. Crescent.”

In an April 24 email to Belt, Jorgensen asked if he spoke with Susan Miller and Tim Wichman about the Crescent Hill proposal. Jorgensen wrote: “I feel we need to find a way to move this proposal forward or Mr. Steven is going to lose interest.”

The most recent reference to selling the ski hill in the emails provided to The Nonpareil was a request from Jorgensen to Pottawattamie Conservation Executive Director Jeff Franco sent June 3 looking to set up a meeting between supervisors and the volunteers on the conservation board.

The public records were provided to The Nonpareil by Eric Hough, a former Pottawattamie Conservation board member. Hough’s wife, Heidi, was appointed to the board in January. Wilber confirmed with The Nonpareil that the public records were provided Tuesday to Hough.

Eric Hough said in an emailed statement to The Nonpareil that he was “very disheartened” to learn supervisors had discussed

selling Crescent Hill. He said the addition of the ski hill “was a culmination of over a decade of hard work and negotiations.”

“The process involved multiple parties and a broad consensus,” Hough said in the email. “I would hate to see that work unraveled because of the ambitions of Mr. Jorgensen and his outside associates.”

Complaints about buying Crescent Hill have lingered for years

In an April 25 email, Jorgensen claimed that “most Pottawattamie county taxpayers are extremely angry about our ownership of Mt. Crescent” and argued that selling the facility would “generate tax dollars for the county instead of debt for the county.”

Supervisor Brian Shea, in an emailed response sent to all board members to Jorgensen’s email, said most people he speaks with see “the addition of the ski hill as very positive for the county park system.”

“One person complaining does not make all tax-payers,” Shea said. “... For someone to come along and listen to a couple of naysayers and bend to whoever gets the highest bid is not being a leader. If we are to build this county we must take some chances.”

The county’s purchase of the ski hill has been controversial for years. A survey in 2022 conducted by United Today, Stronger Tomorrow, for example, found 8 out of 10 county residents opposed the purchase at that time.

In his April 25 email, Shea added that he didn’t like the company interested in acquiring Crescent Hill from the county.

“The only way they get a return is to turn it into a Disneyland park which is totally opposite of what Conservation is about,” Shea said. “Let’s give them 5 seasons to run this and have a discussion with the conservation board and director at that time to decide the future as a board.”

Shea also defended the ski hill during a Republican Party of Pottawattamie County candidate forum held May 18, 2024, calling it a “dream” of conservation officials “for as long as I’ve been involved with them.”

Supervisor Tim Wichman said at the candidate forum that the purchase went beyond the ski hill and wasn’t approved until federal rules were changed to permit such an acquisition.

“It expanded our recreational opportunities over the last couple of years that it’s been in operation,” Wichman said. “It’s not costing the taxpayers any money to fund that.”

MORE: To read Pottawattamie County Attorney Matt Wilber’s legal opinion on selling Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. [NEWSVU](#)

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NONPAREIL EXCLUSIVE REPORT

SUPERVISORS CONSIDER SELLING CRESCENT HILL



SCOTT STEWART, THE NONPAREIL

Dan Borgaila, outdoor operations coordinator at Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, points out snow machine locations on a map during a public open house at the ski hill on Saturday, May 31.

Jorgensen advocating sale to private developer

Editor's Note: This story was updated Tuesday early evening after an interview with Pottawattamie County Supervisor Jeff Jorgensen. Look for complete coverage in Thursday's Nonpareil.

ANDREW SMITH AND SCOTT STEWART
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

A Pottawattamie County supervisor has been involved in discussions to try to sell the county-owned ski hill to a Kansas-based conglomerate behind Genesis Health Clubs.

Supervisor Jeff Jorgensen is advocating selling Crescent Hill at Hitchcock to Steven Enterprises LLC of Wichita, Kansas, in emails shared with The Nonpareil on Tuesday obtained through a public records request filed by a community member.

Jorgensen confirmed he remains interested in seeing the county sell the ski hill in an interview with The Nonpareil on Tuesday afternoon.

Crescent Hill "needs to become a four-season facility as quickly as possible," Jorgensen said. "What's going on now is kind of a piecemeal thing — it's not going to happen fast."

Jorgensen said he believes the ski hill brings the county unnecessary risk, such as potential liability for injuries, while



JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

Skiers and snowboarders ride down the Jaws run at Mt. Crescent Ski Area — now named Crescent Hill at Hitchcock — on Friday, Feb. 17, 2023.

limiting county tax revenues. "I would certainly like to see it developed by an entrepreneur that has the means to develop it, and that way we can

put it back on the county tax rolls," Jorgensen said.

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Council member announces run for Council Bluffs mayor

HAILEY PECK
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Council Bluffs Mayor Matt Walsh will face competition this fall during his run for reelection after council member Jill Shudak announced her candidacy.

Shudak was born and raised in the area and was elected to the Council Bluffs City Council in 2023. She previously has served on the Council Bluffs Community School District Board of Education.

"What made me want to run for mayor is that I think we're at a time in our community where there's some large changes coming and needed to be decided about housing and the future of our city and where we're going to go," Shudak said.

Shudak also said that she thinks it is important for citizens to have an option in

each election.

If elected, Shudak hopes to expand access to affordable housing, partner with community organizations to address homelessness, enhance transparency and communication and practice more civic engagement, according to a news release.

"I'm really looking forward to encouraging a deeper civic engagement, working with the different staff of the city to make sure that everybody's voices are being heard, and really working to bring pride back into our community," Shudak said.

Shudak also noted that she thinks Walsh has done a good job of bringing pride into the community but there are some changes she would still like to see.

Please see **SHUDAK**, Page A2



JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

Jill Shudak carries ballots into the Pottawattamie County Auditor's Office at the courthouse on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024.