

Traffic stop
led to arrest of
MS-13 ‘kingpin’

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Open house
planned for
Baldwin Court

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Tuesday, July 15, 2025

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SALE LACKS SUPPORT

New legal opinion says Crescent Hill not high risk to county



ANDREW SMITH, THE NONPAREIL

Crescent Hill at Hitchcock and the larger Hitchcock Nature Area is part of Western Iowa’s Loess Hills, which is visible from one of Crescent Hill’s parking lots on Wednesday, July 9, 2025.

ANDREW SMITH
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Pottawattamie County Supervisor Jeff Jorgensen could stand alone after three other supervisors confirmed they would not support a sale of Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, which, by Iowa Code, is not even in their purview.

Only three days after Pottawattamie County Conservation shared its master plan for the former Mt. Crescent Ski Area property on May 31 — seeking to transform the ski hill into a four-seasons destination with new amenities — a former director of the county department said he heard of a “rumor” the supervisors wanted to sell the real estate instead.

Mark Shoemaker, who stepped down last year after a quarter century at Pottawattamie County Conservation, said the supervisors cannot sell the property — only the Pottawattamie County Conservation Board could do so. The county attorney agreed with that assessment in a written opinion April 28.

Shoemaker said the county’s purchase of Crescent Hill at Hitchcock was required to protect a portion of Western Iowa’s Loess Hills through an expansion of the Hitchcock Nature Center.

A proposal to sell Crescent Hill to Steven Enterprises LLC has been pitched by Jorgensen and discussed with other supervisors. Jorgensen confirmed the discussions — along with County Attorney Matt Wilber and Conservation Executive Director Jeff Franco — in an exclusive story first published June 24 by The Nonpareil based on documents provided to the newspaper following a public records request.

Steven Enterprises is a Wichita, Kansas-based conglomerate that owns Genesis Health Clubs, many car dealerships, restaurants and other ventures.

Shoemaker described the proposed deal as “shady” in comments made before the supervisors in a public meeting.

“I will not stand by while 30 years of dedication is thrown away in favor of a potentially shady organization that may not have the best interest of this county and its people in mind,” Shoemaker said.

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 **VIEW:** For additional photos, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Brothers spend 18 years restoring historic home

HAILEY PECK
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Two brothers were honored for their hard work in restoring a house from the late 1800s.

The Eiseman House on Park Avenue in Council Bluffs was restored by John and Dave Huggins, which earned them the Preserve Our Treasures Award.

The Historical Society of Pottawattamie County and Council Bluffs Mayor Matt Walsh presented the brothers with the award on Wednesday.

“This shows your dedication to preservation and basically your love for the neighborhood,” said Michelle Mutchler-Burns who is a member of the board of directors at the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County.

Walsh also expressed his gratitude to the brothers for the work they have done in the neighborhood. However, while they were honored to receive the award, the Huggins brothers restored the house simply because they liked doing it.

“We didn’t do it for that. We really just

wanted to save the house. It’s a beautiful little house, and it needed to be saved,” John said.

The house was built in 1882 and eventually was converted into seven apartments. The building began to deteriorate and the owner at the time looked to sell. In swooped the Huggins brothers who bought the house in 2007.

“It was a wreck. I mean, an absolute wreck. It was one or two steps away from the wrecking ball when we bought it. It was unlivable. It probably easily could have been condemned,” John said.

The brothers proceeded to work on the house for 18 years outside of their full-time jobs hoping to restore the building to its original single-family home layout.

The house for them was a passion project. The Huggins brothers enjoy old houses and restoring them. They have worked on around four other houses in the neighborhood that they have also restored.

The Eiseman house still has its original

Please see **HOME**, Page A2



JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

From left, Mayor Matt Walsh, John Huggins, Historical Society of Pottawattamie County board member Michelle Mutchler-Burns and Dave Huggins pose for a portrait outside the former Eiseman House, 134 Park Ave., on Wednesday, July 9, 2025. The Huggins brothers received the society’s Preserve Our Treasures Award for their dedication to restoring historic houses on the block.

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Weather

Some sun, humid, t-storm
High 89 • Low 70
FORECAST • A8



Hitchcock

From A1

“With the proposed master plan, there can be a blend of conservation and tourism at Crescent Hill. I’m not sure Genesis Health will truly care about the Loess Hills or conservation.”

Rodney Steven II is the president and owner of Genesis Health Clubs, and Steven splits leadership at Steven Enterprises with his brother, Brandon. Steven Enterprises did not respond to messages from The Nonpareil seeking comment.

Aim is a ‘more attractive tourist destination’

Jorgensen told The Nonpareil that Steven would transform the property into a four-seasons health retreat with a new lodge to facilitate conventions. He also believes Steven would help expand area trail networks if he were to start doing business in Pottawattamie County.

“He’s had his employees out there a couple times, I believe, for kind of a getaway,” Jorgensen said. “He loves the pristine nature of the area.”

Jorgensen said he wants Pottawattamie County to become an “even more attractive tourist destination,” and that private ownership of Crescent Hill would support that. He referenced development in Treynor — and its support from TS Bank — as an example of how businesses investments benefit communities.

TS Bank has been the largest financial supporter of Vision Treynor Group. The group’s efforts spurred development on a sports complex and surrounding housing subdivisions in the last 15 years. The development has also received significant funding from the Iowa West Foundation as well as the Charles E. Lakin Foundation.

For Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, Jorgensen said Steven Enterprises has “the financial wherewithal to get things done.” Jorgensen told The Nonpareil that he did sign a nondisclosure agreement with the developers, although the identity of the firm was disclosed in public records first obtained by Eric Hough, a former Pottawattamie Conservation board member, who shared them with The Nonpareil.

While some opinions on their proposal became visible in emails released with the records, all supervisors except Board of Supervisors Chair Scott Belt have since shared their position on the proposal.

Proposed sale appears to lack sufficient votes

In an email to Wilber on April 25, Jorgensen said “there are currently at least three of us who would like to see Mt. Crescent put on the (Board of Supervisors) agenda and sold.” If that were true at the time, it no longer is, according to supervisors interviewed by The Nonpareil.

“I am not interested in discussing anything about the sale of Mt. Crescent,” Wichman said in an interview last week. “When he says three people, I have no idea who they are.”

Wichman cited a legal opinion distributed by the county attorney on April 28, which stated, “the Board of Supervisors does not have the legal authority to consider any disposition of the property,” and that, in fact, the conservation board handles “custody, control and management” of county parks.

“Matt Wilber, our county attorney, give us a directive ... the board doesn’t have the authority to sell a conservation area, a park or anything like that,” Wichman said. “I don’t even know why it’s even being discussed by any board member, because, number one, we can’t do it. And, number two, Tim Wichman doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

Supervisors Susan Miller and Brian Shea both told The Nonpareil they also would not support a move to sell Crescent Hill, which has been integrated into Hitchcock Nature Center over the last three years.

“I am against selling the ski hill,” Miller said. “In my opinion, preservation of the Loess Hills is a county priority.”

Miller said that, although she was not a supervisor when the county purchased Mt. Crescent, she was a supportive member on the Iowa West Foundation Board of Directors when the nonprofit granted the county around \$1.4 million towards purchasing the ski hill.

“Their mission and vision is all about building a community that people want to live and work in, and buying this property fell right into that,” Miller said. “We talked about it, but it wasn’t a difficult decision for the board to make.”



ANDREW SMITH PHOTOS, THE NONPAREIL

The “Easy Street” slope at Crescent Hill at Hitchcock is seen from the lodge’s picnic area on Wednesday, July 9, 2025.



A Crescent Hill at Hitchcock sign stands at the entrance to the ski area on Wednesday, July 9, 2025.



A sign for the Crescent Ridge Trail at Crescent Hill and the Hitchcock Nature area is seen on Wednesday, July 9, 2025. The trail opened in 2023 and connects the ski area to Hitchcock’s 14 mile trail system, according to the park’s website.

While the supervisors appoint conservation board members, that’s where their responsibilities end, Miller said. The supervisors don’t dictate goal setting and project decisions for Pottawattamie Conservation. Its board, though, does report successes, failures, lessons learned and conservation goals in two reports to the supervisors each year.

Miller said the Conservation Board has been “very methodical” in their execution of the four-season master plan for Crescent Hill at Hitchcock, which would seek donations from foundations and others to support its proposals — not reply upon taxpayer funding.

“It takes time to put all of those pieces together,” Miller said. “Especially if you’re looking for grant funding to help with some of this transition, you’ve got to stack your funding opportunities together. You’ve got to match your grants. There’s a lot of moving pieces that have to be assembled, but that’s all the responsibility of the conservation board.”

‘No reason ... to second guess’ county attorney

Jorgensen previously told The Nonpareil he was seeking an alternative legal opinion from Wilber on the supervisor’s legal authority to sell the hill.

Miller, however, doesn’t agree with that approach.

“When my county attorney gives me a legal opinion, that’s what I lean into,” Miller said. “There’s no reason for me to second guess it.”

Miller said Jorgensen had reached out to all supervisors asking them to meet two at a time with a developer — who would appear to be Steven based on email references. Doing so would avoid holding a public meeting, which is a standard practice government entities use when discussing real estate and development.

However, Miller said she couldn’t find a time that worked with both her and the developer’s schedule. She said Jorgensen has sought to get the sale of Crescent Hill onto the supervisors’ agenda.

“Since I didn’t meet with the

developer, Jeff never talked to me about it again, so I’ve never had any conversations with him about it,” Miller said.

Shea’s position on a sale was evident in the emails provided to The Nonpareil.

“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 in an email. “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.”

Loess Hills site almost became a literal dump

Shea, who was formerly mayor of Crescent, was involved in helping to keep the Loess Hills area originally designated as the Hitchcock Nature Center from almost becoming a literal dump.

“I was involved in helping stop Hitchcock from becoming a dump,” Shea said in an interview. “Once we stopped that, the conservation foundation raised enough money to buy that park, and that park has been coming along for over 35 years and is now just short of 1,500 acres.”

Hitchcock Nature Center, formerly YMCA Camp Hitchcock, was purchased by a Boston-area businessman in the mid-1980s. Michael Angel promised the area in the Loess Hills would remain accessible for environmental education — as Pottawattamie County Conservation had been successfully running the retreat for a brief time after the YMCA camp’s closure, according to archival articles from The Nonpareil.

Angel, however, pivoted shortly after purchasing the land, announcing plans to build a water bottling plant, then a landfill. Crescent and Honey Creek residents did not appreciate what some called “veiled threats” from Angel towards their backyard hills.

“I could sell off as much fill as I wanted — literally sell the hills off by the truckload without any approval whatsoever,” Angel is quoted saying in a Sept. 17, 1989, Nonpareil article. “I can bulldoze

and clear-cut every tree on my entire property — level it — without any permit. If I can’t make use of my land as a landfill, I’ll sell it off by the truckload. I have a right to make a living from my piece of property.”

Angel suggested he could clear timber, operate a gravel quarry and scrape away the Loess Hills to sell as fill dirt. His plans to create a landfill — or more — were foiled as county officials denied zoning requests, and creditors eventually foreclosed on his property as Angel faced mounting debt.

Pottawattamie County Conservation eventually took control of the property in December 1991 with a \$283,000 purchase made by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, paid back by the county.

Shea said the conservation department has had a clear plan to purchase as much land surrounding Hitchcock as possible, including Crescent Hill. No local tax funds were used to purchase Mt. Crescent, since the Iowa West grant and federal American Rescue Plan Act funds were used to cover the \$3.5 million purchase.

Shea said he did meet with Steven and a few other people around a year ago, where they made their proposal for the land.

“I listened to their proposal and, when we were done, they asked me what I thought,” Shea said. “I told them of the work we’ve done; I would never vote to sell or let somebody else run this, as I am quite aware what the conservation department wanted for this property.”

Shea said he told the group that the only way they could pay for a \$20 million to \$50 million investment would be to turn it into a “complete Disneyland,” and he said that’s not what conservation is about. Nobody has talked to him since the meeting about the ski area, Shea said.

“We have stewards from the conservation department that are doing an amazing job with all our parks. Mt. Crescent was pretty run down when we got it, and we’ve invested some money, and it has won awards for how good of a park it is,” Shea said.

Shea said the already-completed improvements are important to the county.

“We need these things and bicycle trails to attract and keep younger families for our workforce,” Shea said. “And, if you don’t believe that, go up there during the winter and see how many people are at that park and having fun, and ask them what they think of the park.”

Shea said the county needs to save the park by keeping it under Pottawattamie County Conservation’s control. Doing so would attract and keep young families, Shea said — key when the county has only see half a percent of population growth in the last 30 years.

“I’ve worked for myself almost my entire adult life, and there is no way you can get a return and just keep it a little simple deal like they’re saying they want to do,” Shea said.

The Nonpareil has been unable to reach Belt for comments for this story, or on other recent events, despite repeated efforts.

Franco says a meeting between the conservation board and Jorgensen — or developers — has yet to be scheduled or take place. Jerry Mathiasen, president of the conservation board, told The Nonpareil for the June 26 articles that the board had not received any information nor had discussions on Jorgensen or Steven’s vision.

Claims of liability risks at Crescent Hill rejected

In addition to wanting Cres-

cent Hill developed faster and put “back on the county tax rolls,” Jorgensen also argued the ski hill is that it poses liability and insurance risks through possible injuries on the slopes.

“The county is facing a lawsuit because that ski facility has a lot of risk as far as insurance goes,” Jorgensen said. “That’s another thing that we need to think about and maybe try to eliminate that risk by selling it.”

Franco said a lawsuit was filed years ago when the county first started operating the Mt. Crescent facility. Neither Franco nor Wilber said they could comment further on the specifics of the litigation.

A Council Bluffs resident echoed Jorgensen’s concern during public comments at the July 1 supervisors meeting. Jason Bliley, who said he was once an employee of the U.S. National Park Service, shared a personal story from when he was located at the Montezuma Castle National Monument in Arizona.

Bliley said because the park charges a fee for admission — like Crescent Hill for skiing — they were able to be sued after a child inserted their hand into a hand dryer and “got their fingernails chopped off.”

“The federal government has indemnity about being sued for just about any reason — you really can’t do it,” Bliley said. “But when I was at Montezuma Castle National Park, we got sued and the judges allowed it to go through.”

Wilber said in a meeting with Franco and The Nonpareil that potential liability for an accident doesn’t work that way, either nationally or in Iowa courtrooms.

Wilber shared a legal opinion from the County Attorney’s Office with Franco and the Board of Supervisors on July 8 that clarifies the scope of liability Pottawattamie County — and by extension taxpayers — faces in operating the ski facility in Honey Creek.

The opinion cites the Federal Tort Claims Act, which allows a person or persons to sue the United States for the negligent acts of its agents which have caused harm. The federal government generally has sovereign immunity from lawsuits.

“There is nothing in the Federal Tort Claims Act which is expanded, or limited, by the choice to charge an admission fee,” according to the county opinion.

The analysis also considers Iowa Code, saying “Iowa has one of the most robust recreational immunity laws in the country insofar as counties and cities are concerned.”

Iowa civil law imposes similar liability onto its municipalities, including county governments, but a specific exemption applies to recreational activity occurring on public property, according to the opinion.

“Iowa’s recreational immunity statute exempts a municipality (which includes cities and counties) from claims which are:

- ‘based upon or arising out of an act or omission of an officer or employee of the municipality or the municipality’s governing body’

- ‘arising out of a recreational activity occurring on public property’

- Resulting from the ‘normal and expected risks inherent in the recreational activity’ and

- of which the person ‘knew or reasonably should have known.’”

Liability waivers are another way Pottawattamie County Conservation covers its bases at the ski hill. The opinion cites a 2021 Iowa Supreme Court decision — involving the previous owners of Mt. Crescent — to show the purpose of waivers.

“Where recreational immunity may not apply, waivers are a commonly employed tool to further limit liability in proprietary settings,” according to the opinion. “These ‘hold harmless’ clauses must contain ‘clear and unequivocal language’ notifying ‘a casual reader that by signing, she agrees to waive all claims for future acts or omission of negligence.’”

Additionally, Franco said the conservation staff is considering new signage and waiver text incorporating verbiage from other states that have statutes explicitly conveying the risks of skiing.

Waivers in Iowa can only be signed by adults, and they cannot sign for a minor. Therefore, Wilber concludes the only claims that could hit insurance would be “negligent acts that harm kids.”

Wilber said he is not concerned about the few cases where immunity or waivers may not apply, as insurance “prevents county taxpayers from shouldering the burden of a rare, but possible, serious injury suffered by a patron.”