



From the Office of Secretary of State

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The following op-ed was submitted by Secretary of State John Gale. A hearing on the appropriations bills for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission will be held next week.

Funding & plans will help preserve Nebraska history and tourism

Tourism is a big deal in Nebraska for counties large and small. After agriculture and manufacturing, it is the state's third largest industry.

In 2012, the state garnered more than \$4 million dollars in lodging taxes. Nebraska's 93 counties received nearly \$16 million dollars collectively. Considering the fiscal benefit, it's time to consider what the future holds for historic and recreational sites in Nebraska. Several bills presented to the legislature would address this.

The biggest boom for tourism in Nebraska started when I-80 was finished in 1968. Suddenly, interstate car and truck traffic blossomed. Attractive rest areas were created. Truck stops, fast food restaurants and motels grew in abundance.

Marketing efforts promoted scenic attractions like Scotts Bluff Monument, Chimney Rock and Lake McConaughy. Communities added their own attractions including festivals, museums, golf courses and historic sites.

Under Gene Mahoney's leadership of the Game and Parks Commission, high priority was given to fundraising as a way to improve our state parks system. Mahoney

Park was developed and existing parks like Fort Robinson underwent major renovations. Fort Atkinson, north of Omaha, was created.

The 20 years that followed brought new additions and changes to Nebraska's landscape. While there was some state help, much of the growth came from entrepreneurs, local foundations and businesses, and local taxes designated for tourism and marketable bond issues.

At that time, the state was more focused on economic development, job growth, foreign investment and providing attractive tax incentives for large business development. Investment in tourism simply wasn't as important when it came to designating state funds for updating, developing or coordinating heritage sites, state parks, or wildlife areas. Many unique and irreplaceable tourist attractions started falling on hard times.

As we forge ahead into 2014, the struggles continue. Ogallala's Front Street is up for sale with no buyers in sight. The Kearney Archway has been saddled with bankruptcy and its future is still unsecured. Facilities at the Minden Pioneer Village are in need of refurbishing and Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City is being challenged by the steep cost of upkeep.

At this time, the Game and Parks Commission has a \$42 million backlog in maintenance projects at aging state parks. Help is being proposed in the form of three bills. LB 814 would divert \$2.5 million annually to support the Commission's efforts. LB 1033 would allocate \$2.1 million for improvements at Arbor Lodge State Park and LB 873 would give the Commission a one-time infusion of \$15 million.

Local efforts continue to be essential to growing tourism in Nebraska. For example, the city of Grand Island and local donors have exceeded their goal of \$7 million to fund a major renovation of the Stuhr Building. The long-term dedication of sales tax in North Platte led to the creation of the Golden Spike Tower and Visitor Center at the world's largest rail classification yard.

These are all encouraging efforts to help boost our third largest industry. Still, there's much to be done. Creation of a state/local/foundation partnership could further ensure the preservation of those irreplaceable attractions, providing long-lasting benefits. State parks, heritage sites, county museums, and private museums with rich historic or natural history resources need a coordinated long-term state plan to insure that tourism brings revenue to local governments through sales and lodging taxes, thereby reducing reliance on property taxes alone.

Having lived and worked in both Ogallala and North Platte for a large part of my life, I am well-acquainted with the value of tourism to local communities. As a constitutional officer from the west end of the state, I have a keen interest in

preserving and sustaining Nebraska's rich history for the benefit of our citizens, their children and the visitors to our state. Once museums and natural historic sites are lost, they are gone forever. Many people have long regretted the day when there was no plan to save the Union Pacific Depot where the historic WWII North Platte Canteen operated. It was lost to history.

As a major goal for the Sesquicentennial in 2017, the development of a state/local/foundation plan to preserve and upgrade our many endangered historic and recreational sites would be about as big a deal as anything I can think of as a gift to future generations.

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