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TePee Pools' lease with State Parks terminated

by Cindy Glasson

Thermopolis and Hot Springs County may well lose a business that has been a cornerstone of the Hot Springs State Park since the 1970s with the termination of a lease by the State Parks and Cultural Resources Division with TePee Pools, Inc.

According to documents received by TePee Pools, Inc. on March 7, the state has found the company to be in noncompliance with its 35-year lease and the corporation must vacate the premises within 60 days of receipt of the letter.

TePee Pools has been a concessionaire in the park for 24 years after purchasing the pool from Jim Mecca.

In a recent interview with Milward Simpson, Director of the State Parks and Cultural Resources (SPCR), he indicated the owners of the TePee had been required to provide a master plan for the facility and the state's requirements had been made clear.

Simpson said his office worked directly with TePee Pool, meeting with them in person and through back-and-forth correspondence, sending them master plan templates and offering the services of the Small Business Development Center in Laramie.

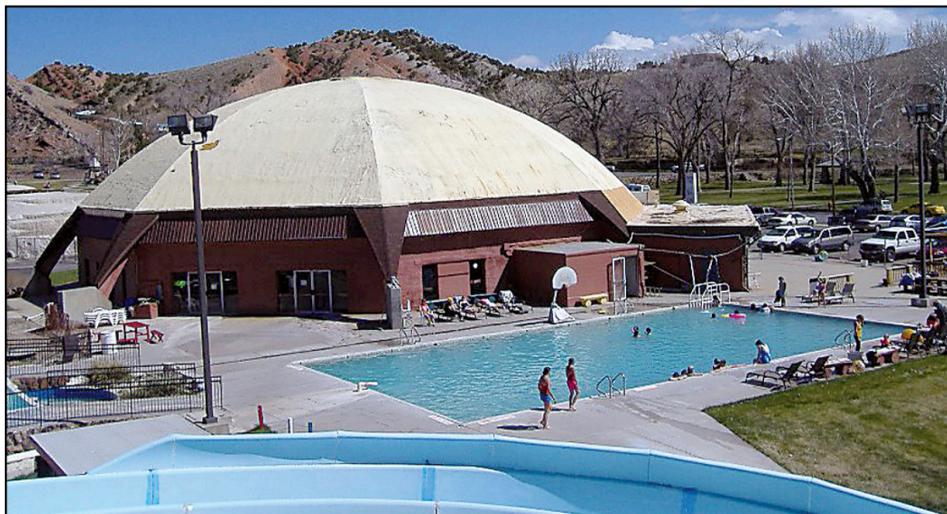
"We sent them what we thought was clear as to the development we wanted," Simpson said. The state was not just looking for completion dates, but a firm commitment that those projects would be accomplished.

Not having a master plan in place resulted in a "closure for cause" by the state. The company has been given 60 days to remove the structure and improvements from the park – returning the land back to its original condition.

No compensation will be paid to TePee Pools for the structure or improvements, which they own, and Simpson said if the building is not demolished, the state may do the job and bill TePee Pools for the costs.

In a press release issued by TePee Pools, it states they "submitted the master plan in a timely basis on July 1, 2013. Virtually no substantive reply from the state pertaining to the submitted master plan was received until March 7, 2014."

A series of letters between the state and the company show several issues the state had with the proposed master plan, including the elimination of verbiage the state found to be ambiguous.



TePee Pools, Inc., has owned Hellie's TePee Pools for the last 24 years. Before that, Jim Mecca was the facility's owner for about a quarter century.

What they want

In a letter dated June 26, 2013, the state put forth a few things they wanted to see in the master plan, including completion dates for the projects.

Those included a lazy river/splash park to be completed by 2014, high-speed slides to be operational by 2016, and diving boards and climbing walls to be installed by 2018.

"For the past eight years we have been trying to resolve this issue through communication and cooperation with the state," the company said. "We would still like very much to resolve these issues in an amicable and mutually satisfactory way."

"The state's decision has seemed to harden over time, and while it is still our hope that this situation can be resolved, we cannot yield to unreasonable demands."

Simpson said the state is looking toward a "world-class facility" that the state would create, much like the Lava Hot Springs located near Pocatello, Idaho.

According to the TePee, many of the requested

features would require additional insurance coverage that is either not available or beyond financial means in order to comply.

Also in question is the use of the mineral water with the lowered flow from the Big Spring. Simpson indicated the type of facility the state would like to build would require a combination of mineral water and city water to fulfill the property's needs.

During the interview, Simpson said the state is putting together a request for proposal so outside entities, other than the state, could have the opportunity to provide ideas for a new facility.

At this time, Simpson sees the future as it being a state- or privately-built facility. In a management contract the state would own the facility and contract with a private business to run it, which might present an opportunity for local businesses to apply to be the management company.

"This should be a win-win situation," Simpson said. "The TePee is no longer adequate and the town should benefit from a new facility. The economic benefit could be immense."

"We feel the hot springs is a world-class resource and Thermopolis deserves a world-class facility to match it...You have fantastic natural and cultural resources here."

Impacts on the community

Simpson said the type of facility the state would like to see created would take anywhere from one to two years to complete.

The state feels the Star Plunge, also in Hot Springs State Park, could handle the overflow from the closure with some help from the State Bath House.

Currently, the Bath House has limited hours of operation, which Simpson said would be expanded.

On busy weekends – especially holidays like the Fourth of July, Labor Day and Memorial Day – there is evidence that both swimming pools are at capacity. On those weekends the hotels are full and restaurants do a booming business as well.

The four concessionaires in Hot Springs State Park had a collective gross revenue of \$4,575,642 in 2012. Of that amount, more than \$1 million went to the TePee Pool and Star Plunge, collectively.

Each of the concessionaires in the state park are required, by their leases, to provide an amount to the state – based on their individual gross revenue. In 2012, the total return to the state was \$33,655.

Rebuttal

TePee Pools, Inc. feels the order to evacuate the facility "amounts to a wrongful taking by the state."

In addition, "TePee Pools has invested over one million dollars in the structures and improvements, and substantially more in upkeep and maintenance."

"TePee Pools has attempted to comply with all provisions of the lease, including the master plan, and have been thwarted in every attempt by Mr. Simpson and the State."

"TePee Pools desires to continue to communicate with the state to restore a positive working relationship and to continue operating as a concessionaire in Hot Springs State Park."

"We have put our money where our mouth is by investing and preserving, and should not be the subject of an unfair and unjustified 'wrongful taking' manipulated by unreasonable individuals."

Final curtain call: Eric Kay directs his last Drama Department play

by Cindy Glasson

The Hot Springs County High School Drama Department will be presenting its spring production, "David's Mother," as the final show produced by long-time director Eric Kay.

While Kay will continue to teach within the school district, he has decided to retire as the drama coach after several back-to-back State Drama wins and 19 years as a drama instructor.

"It's bittersweet," Kay said. "I still enjoy it, that's not the reason I'm getting out of it. It's really a time issue. I've spent a lot of time with other people's kids and now it's time to spend some with my own."

Kay said the productions over the years have covered a lot of teen issues along with some classics.

"We've covered a lot of emotional areas," he said. "I have really asked a lot of them with some of the shows we've done."

"David's Mother" is the only show Kay has wanted to do again in his career and thought it would be a good one for his last hurrah.

"I directed this show in 1995," he said, "and opening night was a complete train wreck. Closing night was perfection."

"I had a dynamite ensemble cast that first time. I just wanted to do it one more time, see if I

could hit that perfection again."

David's Mother a stage drama

Audiences should be aware that this production is not rated R, but it's more of a prime time TV type of show than something from the Disney Channel.

"We adjusted the language, but didn't take all of it out," Kay said. "The language is just very much a part of some of the characters. They are so deep, so big, some of it had to be left in."

Kay said he definitely prefers doing drama over comedy when it comes to the plays, putting together an ensemble cast that can not only play off of each

other but with each other, creating a sense of trust on the stage.

The department has come a long way under Kay's tutelage, too, starting out with just 12 students (and a 12-person cast for the first show) to 36 students this year.

"We did shows people hadn't heard of," Kay said, adding that royalty costs were the biggest factor in the beginning. "As our program grew we could do bigger productions."



Eric Kay

And Kay has the gold to prove his worth as a director.

The department started going to State Drama competitions in 2004. Since 2006 the team has brought home either first or second place every year in both 1A/2A and 3A divisions. Kay is also the only "coach" to hold a four-peat, bringing home first place in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013.

Opening night for "David's Mother" will be Tuesday, April 15 at 7 p.m. in the auditorium.

Additional performances will be held on Thursday and Friday, April 17 and 18.

The show is free; however, donations to the program are always welcome.

The cast includes: Sally, Amanda Randolph; David, Logan Kay; Gladys, Amanda Dinsmore; Bea, Tori Anderson; Susan, Clare Denney; Phillip, Darren Leonhardt; John, Jared Mohr-Leiva; Justine, Macinna Holm.

Crew: Make-up, Kaili Johanson, Michal Moon. Scene, Clare Denney, Kameron Olsen, Danielle Randolph, Ryan Bleak, Aressa Goodrich. Sound, Cody Bleak. Lighting, Makelti Blake, Fawn Rush, Alex Jensen, Danielle Randolph. Publicity, Kameron Olsen, Fawn Rush. Stage Manager, Morgan McCain

Elk target shooting



Kids of all ages had fun during the Big Game Banquet and Auction, sponsored by the Big Horn Basin Chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation on Saturday evening at the fair building. Above, Brylee Mindrum and Lexi Overfield shoot darts at an elk target during one of the games. Details of the banquet are on page 4. – Joe Sova photo

County valuation at \$226,757,603

Hot Springs County Assessor Shelley Deromedi has released the valuation estimate for the county for 2014.

Oil, gas and coal estimates were gathered from the Minerals Tax Division of the State Department of Revenue. The estimates are based on actual severance tax production reports the various businesses must submit.

Deromedi said the estimates on the oil values are lower than last year; however, the gas and coal figures are up slightly.

Locally assessed values total \$48,811,878 with state assessed utilities totaling \$5,788,170.

Railroads brought in an additional \$3,673,857 and hard minerals were valued at \$2,692,153. Oil production for 2013 was

down 2.47 percent for a valuation of \$165,349,131.

Gas production rose 19.5 percent for 2013 with an estimated valuation of \$442,414.

That puts the total valuation for Hot Springs County down slightly, .75 percent, at \$226,757,603.

The figures are not final as companies have until July 1 to appeal their individual valuations.

April 1 moisture levels highest since 1997

by Drew Foster

Measurements gathered at the Owl Creek SNOTEL site indicate the highest snow water equivalent levels measured on April 1 in more than 15 years.

April 1 readings showed 7.6 inches of snow water equivalent, the highest April 1 measurement since 8.1 inches was recorded in 1997. At this time last year, 5.4 inches was measured, while 1.2 inches was recorded in 2012. Measurements last topped seven inches in 2003, when 7.2 inches were recorded.

"This is the perfect kind of spring that we want," said Bill Gordon, Hot Springs County Emergency Management Coordinator, noting that a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 30-day weather forecast calls for relatively cool weather that should provide an even melt to the snowpack.

Gordon said that as of Monday the snow water equivalent measured at the Owl Creek SNOTEL site was closer to 8.3 inches.

"I'm not alarmed by these numbers," Gordon said with regard to the possibility of flooding. "I'm optimistic of these numbers, as are the farmers and ranchers."

As of Monday, the Bighorn Basin received 150 percent of snow water equivalent as a percentage of median, Gordon said. That compares to 93 percent on March 31, 2013. Through March, every drainage basin in the state had received at least 114 percent of snow water equivalent as a percentage of median. At the same time last year, no drainage basin in the state was above 99 percent.

Boysen Reservoir's water storage, however, recently dipped – it was 80.6 percent full as of Monday, compared to 82.9 percent in late March.

Bureau of Reclamation officials earlier predicted Boysen would receive 1.09 million acre-feet of inflow this water year. The reservoir received 502,100 acre-feet during the 2013 water year and 571,400 acre-feet through the 2012 water year.