

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office  
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee March 26, 2025

**ANDERSEN:** Welcome to the Government, Military and Veteran Affairs Committee. I am Senator Andersen from the 49th District, which is northwest Sarpy County in Omaha, Nebraska. I serve as the vice chair for this committee. The committee will take up the appointments in the order posted. Public hearing is your opportunity to be part of the legislative process and to express your position on the, on the proposed appointee. If you're planning to testify today, please fill out one of the green testifier sheets here on the table in the back of the room. Be sort to print clearly and fill it out completely. When it is your turn to come forward to testify, give the testifier sheet to the page or to the committee clerk. If you do not wish to testify but you would like to indicate your position on the appointee, there are also yellow sign-in sheets at-- on-- back-- on the table in the back of the room for each of the appointees. These sheets will be included as an exhibit in the official hearing record. When you come up to testify, please speak clear-- clearly into the microphone. Tell us your name and spell your first and last name to ensure we get an accurate record. We will begin each appointee with the appointee's opening comments, followed by questions the-- from the committee, and then followed by proponents of the appointee, and then opponents, and finally anybody in the neutral capacity. We will finish with the closing-- disregard. There'll be no closing statements. We will be using a three-minute light system for all testifiers. Are we doing-- oh. OK. So we're not doing limit-- so don't-- disregard the lights. All committee members may come, come and go during the hearing. This has nothing to do with the importance of the appointee being heard. It's just part of the process, as senators may have bills to introduce in other committees. A final thoughts to facilitate today's hearing. If you have any handouts or copies of your testimony, please bring up at least 12 copies and give them to the page. If you do not have enough copies, the page will make sufficient copies for you. Please silence or turn off your cell phones. You may see committee members using their electronic devices to access more information. Verbal outbursts or applause are not permitted in the hearing room. Such behavior may be cause for you to be asked to leave the hearing. Finally, the committee procedures for all committees state that written position comments on a appointee to be included in the record must be submitted by 8 a.m. the day of the hearing. The only acceptable method of submission is via the Legislature's website. Written po-- position letters will be included in the official hearing record, but only those testifying in person before the committee will be included on the committee statement. I will now have the committee members with us introduce themselves, starting on my right.

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**HUNT:** Hi, everyone. I'm Megan Hunt, and I represent District 8 in the northern part of midtown Omaha.

**GUERECA:** Hello, everyone. Dunixi Guereca, Legislative District 7: downtown in south Omaha.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Good afternoon. John Cavanaugh, District 9: midtown Omaha.

**LONOWSKI:** Hello. I'm Dan Lonowski, District 33. That's Adams County, Kearney County, and rural Phelps County.

**WORDEKEMPER:** Welcome. Dave Wordekemper, District 15: Dodge County, western Douglas County.

**McKEON:** Dan McKeon, District 41, central Nebraska: eight counties.

**ANDERSEN:** Senator Rita Sanders from Bellevue is the chairman-- this-- of this-- chairwoman of this committee and will be joining us shortly. Also assisting the committee today: to my left is our legal counsel, Dick Clark; and to my far left is committee clerk Julie Condon. We have two pages for the committee today. Pages, please stand up and introduce yourself, your hometown, and the school you're attending and your major.

**LOGAN WALSH:** I'm Logan. I'm from Denver. I go to UNL. And I'm a junior, finance, and econ major.

**ARNAV RISHI:** Hey. I'm a junior and political science major at UNL.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you. And with that, we'll begin today's hearing. The first appointee is Mr. Wolf. Welcome to the committee, Mr. Wolf.

**DAVID WOLF:** Thank you. My name's David Wolf, D-a-v-i-d W-o-l-f. And if you listen to my-- president of my board, you might want to rethink the light structure when I talk. But it's an honor, a privilege. Very humbled when I was asked to apply and then eventually appointed by the governor for the Nebraska State Tourism Commission. Just a quick background on myself. I am a graduate of UNL. Our family moved to Nebraska from the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s. In the museum world, you need to clarify between 18 and 19. But we moved away for a couple years and then moved back. And it's been home ever since. I did attend UNL and majored in political science. And then met my wife. We went to high school together, rekindled. We have three kids: a senior who's about ready to graduate, and then two girls in middle school. I worked for the NRDs for about eight years. So I was on the-- their

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information and education committee, which is a statewide organization, the Nebraska Water Resources Association, representing the North Platte River Valley, where we would do-- we'd come and talk to the Legislature. We also did some education on the federal level. So I do have some experience with statewide organizations and really working with elected officials on the city, county, state, and, like I said, federal level. Tourism-- about ten years I got on the local county tourism board. I ran a 5K, 10K walk/run that helps veterans in emergency situations. And I thought, wow, this might be something interesting to go on. And I-- my term limited out a couple years ago, but I still stay on, on the grants committee for, for them because I've probably had the most experience with, with the grants. So I still like to help our events and local attractions promote tourism. Last year, I was asked and was voted on to be on the Nebraska Museum Association's board of directors. So in three weeks, I will be one year on. And so that's a great organization that's promoting not only the museums but also tourism of our area. Six years ago in July, I, I was hired on the Legacy of the Plains Museum in Gering. I like to think it's one of the premier museums in Nebraska. We have about 100 acres. We are an active farm. We rent out, oh, about 70 of-- acres for alfalfa. And then we do 6 to 10, depending on how much energy my volunteers have that spring to, to utilize '40s, '50s area equipment. And we plant corn. We plant potatoes. So if you're interested in farm-fresh potatoes, come on out for our harvest festival. We'll dig them up and, and you can pick them. And then we do a specialty crop every, every year. We rotate through five different crops. Really highlighting the agricultural history, the cultural history of, of really the High Plains region. We also have eight-- make sure I counted them right-- eight longhorns. So, yes, I am a farmer/rancher. But it's been an awesome experience really learning that, that history. And one of the best things about museum-- and I'm sure some of my fellow appointees will say-- the people, the engagement that we get every day, from-- whether it's, you know, from across the river in Scottsbluff or the Netherlands. It's really interesting to be able to talk to people, hear what they have to say, hear their stories. And there's always a tidbit that we can use with the next person to say, hey, you know, this is why we're so important. And, and part of the reason why I want to be on this commission is to, again, to promote tourism but also the, the history of, of, of our great state. OK. I think-- I kind of jotted down some goals as we were traveling yesterday. You know, I want to continue, I think, our shared goal of making Nebraska a tourism destination. We're not a flyover state. We have some amazing pe-- places here, amazing attractions, and of course the people are great. So we want to do that. I want to increase that competition-- cop-- cooperation, not competition. That's wrong--

increase cooperation between east and west. You know, I'll say this now and I'll reiterate it again, you know, the-- rising tides lift all ships. And if we can get people to come to Nebraska and see what a great place this is, they'll come back, whether they're going to Omaha for the College World Series or they're coming to our harvest festival event in September. It's not a competition. We want to get people here. And we know that if we get them here, we'll, we'll get them to come back. I think the State Department has done a great job of marketing. And I want to help them explore some other markets that we can look at. They've really focused on the west Denver. There's 3 to 4 million people in that Front Range area. And I think they're, they're vital to getting up to be able to spend their money and visit, and visit our, our great state. I'd like to also build upon the programs, like the passport program that we have here, and really encourage Nebraskans to explore Nebraska. COVID was a lot of bad things, but one of the good things that it did is it, it allowed Nebraskans to go to other places that they wouldn't have gone to. And we had a lot of eastern Nebraskans has come out west where normally they would not have done it. And so really trying to encourage that, Nebraskans exploring and visiting our great places. And then really the last one is just represent the Panhandle the best that I can. I like to consider myself a-- somebody that really likes to reach out and, and build partnerships and coalitions, and I think together we'll be able to accomplish a lot of the goals that we want to. So like I said, we, we, we want to raise everybody up. We have some amazing attractions. Our natural beauty is, is like no other. And being able to let people know about that and, and be able to come and explore I think is extremely important. The, the State Tourism Office has a booth at the Western Stock Show in Denver, and it's amazing to me how many people come up. And when they see our little tanking display and they want to get in and take a picture of-- how many people actually say, we've been to Nebraska or-- we've heard people say good things about Nebraska when it comes to tourism. And so we, we map out you, hey, you can do a one-day trip. You can do a five-day trip. You can do a two-week trip and not see the same thing. And so it's really encouraging when we have people stop by. Plus they really like the bags for some reason, man. They just love our bags. So there's a lot of red Nebraska bags in, in Colorado, which I'm very happy for, speaking as a UNL alumni. And so finally, it-- like I said before, it's a privilege and honor to be considered, appointed, and then hopefully approved for this position. And I can just hope that I can contribute to everybody goal here is to-- of, of moving Nebraska forward in our tourism sphere. So if you guys have any questions, be more than happy to answer them for you.

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**ANDERSEN:** Thank you, Mr. Wolf. We'll see if there's any questions.  
Senator Guereca.

**GUERECA:** Thank you, Vice Chair Andersen. Thank you, Mr. Wolf. Thank you for making the drive out from, from the Panhandle. So-- just kind of looking at the website here of the Legacy of the Plains Museum. You guys got a lot going on out there.

**DAVID WOLF:** Oh, yeah.

**GUERECA:** A lot of a-- a lot of great stuff. Definitely have to add that to my list. What's, what's your favorite exhibit that you have going on right now over at the museum?

**DAVID WOLF:** Oh, man. You're gonna get me in trouble. So we've done, we've done a ton this last year. We've got a 1919 Holt combine. It's a-- it's an almost all-wood combine. The thing is ma-- it wouldn't even fit in this room. We got that donated. We finally got it down. We got a great tractor collection. Our Japanese Hall and History project was just opened in June. That was a long thing. So the-- a lot of the cultures that kind of make up the sugar beet area, a lot of Germans from Russian. We have Swedes, Greeks. And then the Japanese immigrants came over working the railroad. And so-- they stayed when the jobs for the railroad stopped to work the, the sugar beet fields. And so that's a great project. Vickie Schaepler has done an amazing job with that. But my favorite exhibit is our Technology Wall. And so in-- our, our exhibit opened in 2017. And it has all of these different artifacts. And at the very end is a cell phone. Now, this is also a 2017 cell phone. So it's amazing. You can say the difference that has made. But the-- again, like I said before, it-- it's the connection with the people. And they'll look and they will map out their own history on that wall, and then they'll map out what they know. And we have volunteers that were switchboard operators. And then, and then you have, you know, a five-year-old that knows that's a cell phone, you know, that they can play video games on it or watch videos. So it's a-- it's an exhibit that any generation can appreciate. But my favorite piece is actually in one of our cabins that was built in 1894 by our county's first county clerk. And I call it a Murphy bathtub, but it's a fold down bathtub. And this one has a propane heater on it, so very high tech. But it's, it's a chance to be able to engage but also learn. So, you know, I always tell people, you know where the phrase don't throw the baby out with the bathwater comes from? And everybody's like, no. But they've heard the phrase. And so we're able to be able to say, well, you know, what order do you think people bathed in? Well. Oh, baby first. Nope. Mom and dad first. And-- depending on the family.

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Then probably oldest. And then it goes down. And you put baby last because, first of all, it's probably scalding water, so-- baby's skin's a little sensitive. But babies don't have the best control of things. And you don't want to spend 45 minutes heating up your water and then the first thing that happens is there's an accident. So-- and by the way, when you work out, you know, on a farm or you-- you have plenty of that on your shoes and clothing anyways, especially if you have a lot of animals. But, but it's just that interaction. So that's my, my favorite piece. Plus, I had to brag a little bit about museum.

**GUERECAL:** There you go. I'll have to-- [INAUDIBLE] swing out this summer and check it out. Thank you, sir.

**DAVID WOLF:** Absolutely.

**ANDERSEN:** Any other questions? Seeing none. I, I would like to-- I really-- I to-- truly appreciate your passion and your interest and your-- it shows through in your ability to try and bring things to life, to try and explain to people. Too often you'll get wrapped in books or phones or whatever, but it sounds like what you've done so far is fantastic. And I gotta tell you, I'm a city guy from way back. I grew up outside Detroit, so I've known the expression don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, but I never knew where it came from, so. So I appreciate that.

**DAVID WOLF:** Well, speaking as a Lions, Pistons, Tigers, and Red Wings fan, I appreciate that you are from Detroit.

**ANDERSEN:** How did that happen?

**DAVID WOLF:** You know, family's from Jackson, Michigan, Columbus, Ohio area. So I've actually been able to wear my Lions jacket that I've had for 20 years with pride the last couple years.

**ANDERSEN:** You and, you and me both.

**DAVID WOLF:** Right.

**ANDERSEN:** It's been a long time coming.

**DAVID WOLF:** That's right.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you very much for your testimony. Thanks for your, your energy. And we'll now see if there's other testifiers.

**DAVID WOLF:** Thank you. Appreciate it.

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**ANDERSEN:** Is there anybody testifying as a proponent for Mr. Wolf? Any opponents? Anybody in the neutral capacity? OK. Thank you. Moving-- move on to our next testifier: Mr. Fudge. And just a, a brief comment: we believe that we'll be execing on these appointments by later in the, in the week. And then the notifications will go out after that. Welcome to the Government, Military and Veteran Affairs Committee.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Thank you very much.

**ANDERSEN:** Floor is yours.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Senator Andersen and members of the committee, my name is David Fudge, D-a-v-i-d F-u-d-g-e. My current position is business banking officer with NebraskaLand Bank in North Platte, Nebraska. You probably wonder what has, has to do with tourism-- probably not a whole lot. But as word circulated that the Governor's Office was seeking applicants for the position of commissioner last summer, I was approached by several members of, of our industry. I was wrapping up a 13-year career as executive director of NEBRASKAland Days out in North Platte. And after consulting with a number of folks, I humbly and-- submitted my application. I was grateful to be selected and looking forward to today. So my love for the industry actually started when I was a teenager. I was volunteering for NEBRASKAland Days, helping set up the parades and concerts and that sort of thing. Professionally, I spent 21 years as a member of the media, radio and television out in western Nebraska. And I spent some time in marketing as well. Towards the tail end of that time, I was selected as a board of director for NEBRASKAland Days, served seven years of that capacity as a volunteer. And then at conclusion of that board term, I was hired as the executive director. During the time that followed, I became active in the Nebraska Travel Association, which I'm sure some of you are familiar with. It's a statewide organization that represents the tourism industry. I became involved with that group's leadership board and was twice elected president of that organization. I've remain involved with the group even though my board term has ended, serving on the legislative committee. Nebraska's third largest industry deserves strong, independent representation that works in concert with other state agencies to promote not only Nebraska as a tourist destination worth visiting but also as a place worth relocating to. I'm sure you've heard, but, in North Platte, we're undergoing some rather staggering economic development, and we have a real need for people to come to our state, occupy those jobs, and become residents of our communities. And so tourism oftentimes is a window into that-- into our state and can serve as a driver for not only economic development but also population growth. So should you see fit to confirm the appointment, I would

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commit to working with the commission-- within the commission to further the goal of getting people to come to our state for a look and hopefully convince them to stay as new members of our community. So with that, I'll stop and open it up for questions.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you, Mr. Fudge. Questions? I have a-- oh. Senator Cavanaugh.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Thank you, Vice Chair. Thanks for being here, Mr. Fudge. I really have more of a statement than a, a question. You maybe don't get this a lot, but you're a bit of a celebrity in my house.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Oh, boy.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** Because that-- you guys gave us the Travel Nebraska little video thing that folds out--

**DAVID FUDGE:** That's right. Yes.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** I, I have young kids and we've had to recharge it a number of times. They-- starts opening, and as soon as you start talking, I was like, I recognize that voice. Because you are-- it's a, it's a great video and it's--

**DAVID FUDGE:** Thank you.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** --great impact on my children. So--

**DAVID FUDGE:** We-- that was a--

**J. CAVANAUGH:** So keep up the good work.

**DAVID FUDGE:** That was a product of COVID. That-- normally, we used to interact with state legislators at the start of the, of the session. And during that time, it was a little difficult to do that. So actually, the current president of NEDA's a guy by the name of Steve Maly, Maly Marketing. And we hatched this idea to, to be able to get something in front of you to try and remember the industry while we were all dormant for about 18 months. So that's good to hear. I'm glad, I'm glad somebody saw that.

**J. CAVANAUGH:** I, I just charged it this weekend, so.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Perfect. I've aged a bit since then, I do apologize.

**ANDERSEN:** Any other questions or comments? I would have one comment for you and a question. What specifically-- what focus area were you--



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would you like to-- with the Tourism Commission, what would you look at?

**DAVID FUDGE:** Two areas. One, our marketing, which-- I've got some experience in that line of work-- not only with my experience with NEBRASKAland days but also from my media days when I was active in that industry. But also, we've been very active from the association side and making sure that the asso-- the commission has plenty of budget authority to work with. And so one of the things that I'm passionate about is making sure that we have enough funding as a state to spread the good word about what we have here in our state and the things there are to see and do and the places there are to visit. Because through that, we all achie-- every-- everybody wants property tax relief. Well, our industry's one of those things that can generate that relief by bringing in outside dollars from outside the state that stay once those visitors return home. But then ultimately, I would hope they would stay here too, move to our state and be members of our community, so. Those are two areas that would interest me.

**ANDERSEN:** Awesome. Thank you. Any questions, comments? I would tell you, North Platte, continuing my education as a-- originally a Detroit kid and now being in Sarpy County, a number of us were out in North Platte this last weekend for the renewable beef plant tour and grand opening. It was fantastic. Amazing facility, so. I agree with you. Great things are happening in North Platte.

**DAVID FUDGE:** You know, the, the crazy thing about that development is it's a bunch of local people who came together during a really interesting period of time in our state and decided to come together to try and solve a problem. Most of the founding families are from our part of the world and out in the Panhandle. So it's-- you know, a lot, lot of great innovation came into that thing and a lot of great partnerships as well.

**ANDERSEN:** So I don't speak for Senator Guereca. He's from south Omaha. I'm from northwest Sarpy County. So two, two city guys out in the country, it was a education. I got that feeling that it was all local people coming together for a great cause and making something great happen.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Yeah. It was-- it's-- that was a fantastic day for our community and our state as well, so.

**ANDERSEN:** Yeah. Very impressive.

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**DAVID FUDGE:** Thank you. Thank you. Would invite you back sometime too.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you.

**DAVID FUDGE:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** We received no letters on the testifiers. Are there any proponents for Mr. Fudge? Any opponents? Anybody in the neutral capacity? OK. Thank you very much. We will move on to Mr. Younes. Sir, welcome to the Government, Military Veteran Affairs Committee.

**PAUL YOUNES:** Thank you, Vice Chair, and the committee. My name is Paul Younes, P-a-- P-a-u-l Y-o-u-n-e-s. I'm the President of Younes Hospitality. We operate 15 hotels, soon to be 17. We own them and we operate them: my wife, my children, myself. I've been in, in the hospitality business over 50 years. Working in the hotel industry, restaurants, development, economic development, and variety of things with the tourism. I've been in the visitor bureau board in Kearney, Nebraska for Buffalo Country for 35 years. I served on variety of board, the foundation-- the Hospitality-- University of Nebraska-Lincoln Foundation, as well as UNK Foundation. We served on the chamber board couple times and variety of board in the community. Our community in Kearney, we growing in different paces of the, of the business. We're doing lot of stuff with the, with the tourism. We just built a brand-new chamber building, the whole-- the three groups came together, the visitors bureau, as well as the Chamber, as well as economic [INAUDIBLE]. And we're having a brand-new visitor center. It's located right now with this building on the side of the building. Our community is growing. We just have \$30 million expansion and upgrading the Museum MONA in Kearney. We have the medical center, putting two new medical building right now. We're opening two new cancer center in the community. The community growing all phases. You know, in the past and-- when people talk, talk about tourism, we thought, you know, everybody drive into interstate going to stop by. They're going to spend the night in the hotel and keep going. And as you grow with the business, as you grow with the tourism, you know what people drive on the interstate. They come from all over the country, different countries. It's great. But right now, we have to expand. We have to put some funding. We have to put some dollar to spent in the Kansas and the Missouri market and the Colorado market and the Illinois market and Iowa and North Dakota, South Dakota. We have to spend the money elsewhere to keep bringing more people to our state. And in our campus in Kearney, you know [INAUDIBLE] people saying, you know, where are you getting your people from? You know, when we did this study, we have 40% of the people coming to our hotel, staying in our hotel-- and we do

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have ten of them in Kearney-- around 40% coming really out of state. And that's what we need. The more people come out of state, the more people [INAUDIBLE] money in the state. Will help us tremendously with the lodging taxes, with the county taxes, as well as with tourism. Tourism need money. You know, you-- people doesn't come because they like us here. They want-- we want to let them-- to come to our community, to our state for a reason, what we could offer them. Because if Omaha does good, Lincoln does good, central Nebraska, western Nebra-- all of-- if all of us will do good, it's better for everybody in the state. It's not one person against other. You know, we competing against each other with the business. But if all of us is united as a state will come together and work together to promote tourism in our state as well as neighboring state to bring more people to our state, and that would benefit everybody in the state. All of us, we need to fund one pool with the tourism. Let the director of the commission do their work and attract more people from different places in the state. My family-- I have a wife for 45 years. I have three children. I have ten grandchildren 12 years and younger. All of them work with me. All my kids work with me in the business. And plus my in-laws work with us in the business. You know, we're a family-oriented business. We have a lot of things growing in Kearney. And we're growing the community. We have businesses in Grand Island, Hastings, as well as in Columbus. If you have any question, I'd be more than happy to answer any question.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you, Mr. Younes. Senator Guereca.

**GUERECA:** Thank you, Vice Chair Andersen. Thank you for coming out, Mr. Younes. Well, when I first came to Nebraska in 2012, I actually first came to Kearney. And I hadn't gone back. 2018 was the last time I'd been back until this last year. And just the growth and the expansion has really been incredible. And, you know, I, I applaud the amazing work you've done to really grow Kearney, put it on the map. The facilities are excellent. You know, everything is-- I just-- my, my, my compliments to you, sir, for your vision and the great work you've done to really put Kearney on the map and just make it a powerhouse. I appreciate that.

**PAUL YOUNES:** Thank you, Senator. Nobody could make anything by themselves. I have a great county. I have a great city. We have great staff. I have great family. All of us work together. And the things comes together very good. And then we had tough time in Kearney. In 2019, we had the flood. Every building we have, our 22 buildings there in the same campus, everything was underwater between 2 feet, up to 4 feet. Some of our businesses was out of commission for around six month. Then we opened in January 2020. We opened some of the hotel. 60

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days later, we have to shut them down. COVID came and then we shut down. But the whole city came together. The whole county came together, the staff. We kept every employees working for us at that time to help us to get us rebuilt. And we got-- we came stronger, we came better, and this is the reason where we are today. Thank you for the compliment, Senator.

**ANDERSEN:** Any other questions or comments? Sir, one other comment I would make to you-- and question. I appreciate your, your vast experience. It seems like you-- you've worked in all sides of hospitality, so that's fantastic. Besides out-- outreach that you, that you mentioned with surrounding states, what would be another focus area of yours?

**PAUL YOUNES:** Really my focus area is to, is to promote the state as much as we can, to attract more visitor to come to our state. Because every dollar come to the state would benefit all of us. If it's spent in Kearney or spent in Grand Island or spent in Omaha or Lincoln, in North Platte, Scottsbluff, or wherever it is spent, any dollar come from out of the cit-- out of the state is good money for the, for the state. And if we could focus and try to expand our horizon where we're going to bring more people and to show them, you know, the hospitality that the state has in here. And I think that, you know, with the crane season right now-- you know, we, we call Kearney is-- the capital-- the, the, the capital for the crane. You know, we're having-- they're saying, well, 800,000 crane right now. We're having people come here from around 15 different countries as far as I know, as of last week. We have around 40 state visited the crane this last-- this season already. And the cranes still coming. People-- the more we can bring people from outside and reach outside and spend money on those communities and those states, that will help us to bring more people to our state, and that will be great.

**ANDERSEN:** Awesome. Thank you. Sir, thank you very much for your time testifying. Received no letters. Are there any proponents for Mr. Younes? Opponents? Those in the neutral position.

**PAUL YOUNES:** Thank you, gu-- thank you, senators.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you. So that concludes the testimony with appointee Younes. Now we'll move on to Courtney Dentlinger. Ms. Dentlinger, tha-- welcome to Government, Military and Veteran Affairs Committee.

**COURTNEY DENTLINGER:** Thank you, Vice Chair Andersen and members of the committee. Courtney Dentlinger, C-o-u-r-t-n-e-y D-e-n-t-l-i-n-g-e-r.

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Delighted to be here today for your consideration for confirmation of my appointment to the Nebraska Tourism Commission. I'll tell you a little bit about my background-- and it doesn't include a lot of tourism. However, it includes quite a bit of economic development. And I'm very excited about the opportunity to work with the commission because I see so many opportunities for economic development and tourism efforts to align. They're both incredibly important. Tourism, of course, is an important industry in its own right for the state and bringing in dollars, as was mentioned previously. I'm particularly interested in tourism for two other reasons-- one, workforce development, as was mentioned previously. Sometimes tourism is the very first opportunity somebody has to come to the state of Nebraska and to be familiar with it. And when there are job opportunities and-- they'll-- they're more likely to consider those opportunities and to move to our state. Nebraska's incredibly humble. We have, we have a lot of work to do with respect to getting the word out about Nebraska and what an amazing place it is. Tourism helps that effort. So that's one of the things that I hope to accomplish. But the other is somewhat more personal. We have a lot of youth outmigration in the state of Nebraska. Our own children don't know how amazing this state is, and we haven't done the best job telling them. Tourism can help that as well. Sharing the stories of all of the incredible things we have to do across the state of Nebraska and our history, as was mentioned previously, creates a tremendous sense of pride among our young people. And I think that would help to keep them here, when they have that sense of pride. I have four children of my own. I hope that despite maybe going away to school somewhere, they, like me, will come back to Nebraska and make this their home. Because in my opinion, it's the best place to be. So as I mentioned, I have an economic development background. I worked locally in economic development years ago in the Norfolk area, and one of the first things I did when I took that role was to reach out to my peer in tourism in the, in the local area. And we partnered together on nearly all of our efforts in order to maximize our budgets in order to align our messaging, and we were incredibly successful. And that alignment exists to this day. After my opportunity to do local economic development, I was asked by former Governor Pete Ricketts to come and head up the Department of Economic Development for the state of Nebraska and got to go around the world and tell everyone what an amazing place Nebraska was. So economic development is really in my blood. Love of Nebraska is in every fiber of my being. I'm looking forward to working with the rest of the commission members and all of the staff in order to promote Nebraska, bring more people here, bring more dollars into our communities.

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**ANDERSEN:** Thank you, Ms. Dentlinger. Any questions, comments? I would like to thank you. I see you did some work with the Commission on Military and Veteran Affairs. So I was a vet myself and [INAUDIBLE] as well. Thank you for your service.

**COURTNEY DENTLINGER:** Yes. Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** Receiving no letters. Are there any proponents? Any opponents? OK. Any, any in the neutral capacity? Seeing none. We'll close the hearing on Ms. Dentlinger. And we will move on to Mr. Sabin. So Sabin, welcome to the Government, Military and Veteran Affairs Committee.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Hello. Thank you. Well, good afternoon. Robert Sabin, R-o-b-e-r-t S-a-b-i-n. It's a wa-- it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for taking some time to listen to my advocacy to remain on the Tourism Commission. I am currently the general manager of the Hilton Omaha. In this role, I proudly support about 300 team members at Nebraska's largest hotel. And we welcome about 1,000 people to the state of Nebraska daily-- or, through the week probably. Can't be 1,000 in one day. And in that role-- not only to support those great team members that really show great hospitality and advocacy for what a, a great place to visit in Nebraska is, but I also have the great opportunity to go around the country and through other mechanisms of bringing people that make selections on whether or not their events or their meetings or if they're going to be doing business in the state and at-- in Omaha specifically. I get the great opportunity to advocate on behalf of that. And it is, it is great to see the growth that we've had at the conventions and events that we've hosted at the Hilton Omaha and the CHI Center. If you are aware, we are connected to the CHI Center. And, and it's been terrific as well to see the growth in that area with the parks system. And obviously, the College World Series continues to grow in attendance. And being a, a part of that is, is great pride. And, and our team I think delivers great Nebraska hospitality on a daily bra-- basis. In fact, we just have a group leaving today represented by 47 states and territories, including Guam, that stayed with us. And they were there on-- in association of state courts. So looking into better ways to work with young people in the, in the court system. And you've heard those. You've heard of Berkshire Hathaway and you've heard other great events. And it's, it's with great pride I do that on a daily basis. So that-- I think that is, is an important reason for, you know, for me being a part of the, the commission and adding that type of perspective. And, and as we continue to build tourism and this destination as a fantastic destination for all those not only around the country but around the world. I've been

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with Hilton, which is a Hilton managed proper-- we're the only managed property in the state. And I've been with the Hilton managed company for 15 years. Before that, I was with Starwood for over ten years, which is currently now Marriott. And if-- as you know, in the world of hotels, Marriott and, and Hilton are kind of like Coke and Pepsi, so. So I'm, I'm on either Coke or Pepsi, whichever one you prefer, I guess. So, yeah. So I've been in, in that capacity in, in, in the tourism business and in, in the hotel and hospitality industry for over 30 years. And I would, I would-- it would be with great pride to be reappointed to the Tourism Commission. That's all I have.

**ANDERSEN:** Mr. Nabin [SIC], thank you for your testimony. Any questions? Senator Dunixi-- or, Guereca.

**GUERECA:** Thank you, Vice Chair Andersen. Thank you, Mr. Sabin. You know, as the, as the state senator for LD 7 in the downtown area-- the best district in Nebraska, for the record-- I just want to compliment the, the, the, the good work your team does. And there's always great events, great conventions going on. We have a lot of great things going on in LD 7. And certainly Hilton Omaha is right in the middle of it. So we appreciate that good work.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Appreciate that.

**GUERECA:** Thanks.

**ANDERSEN:** Any other questions, comments? So Sabin, I, I have a question for you.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Yes.

**ANDERSEN:** As a re-- returnee to the commission, what would you say has been the greatest success so far? Something you'd just like to continue to build on?

**ROBERT SABIN:** Yeah. You know, a couple of things that I'm very proud of in being associated with, with the commission. And I've, I've actually been the chair of the commission the last two years-- or-- is certainly our campaigns that we've been able to put into Chicago and getting into new markets. I actually came from Illinois. And it is a very drivable destination to Nebraska. And we have-- we've opened a great can of worms there of people now being introduced to what some of the great things we have here and some of the-- some of the outstanding asset value that we have here. And getting into that-- to that market I think has been really important. And we continue to look at other markets that have been a little bit untapped. And I think that-- that's one of

the things that I take great pride with. The other was that we added a significant structure to creating our annual goals that we wanted in the commission. We did this about two years ago. We brought in a third-party to assess and get all of the commissioners together, because I think it's very powerful to get everybody's opinion collaborated. I think that's one of my key roles in, in the current role as chair, is to get everybody's opinion together. And we were able to create a, a, a very defined set of goals for the executive director, which I think helped him in his capacity, but also helped us define what we needed to do to continue on to be successful. And as we have grown from, you know, the 50th most int-- interesting pla-- destination to 42nd in one of these types of, of, you know, data mechanism polls that they have, I think, you know, that's going to be one of the goals, if I'm continuing on, is to continue to see that growth. Because if that growth happens, then obviously we're going to get more people in this state. We're going to get more tax revenue out of it. And we're also going to potentially, as, as said before, we're going to get more residents. And, and so that's-- I think those are kind of like the two building blocks I want to continue on with.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you. I see you graduated from Ohio State.

**ROBERT SABIN:** I did, yep.

**ANDERSEN:** So a Buckeye fan.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

**ANDERSEN:** I grew up in Michigan. Was not a fan of the Wolverines.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Yeah.

**ANDERSEN:** So I, I grew up as a--

**ROBERT SABIN:** Hey, we got back-to-back championships. We both should be happy.

**ANDERSEN:** So I, I grew up as a Buckeye fan. Even overseas I always liked them. Until I got here and the conversion took. I became a Cornhusker fan. So the question for you is, has the conversion taken? Have you switched over to the Cornhuskers?

**ROBERT SABIN:** Yeah.

**ANDERSEN:** No impact on the appointment.



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**ROBERT SABIN:** I just want to-- no. Every game that Nebraska plays that-- it isn't against Ohio State, I'm a Nebraska fan. I have to be honest in my testimony, you know?

**ANDERSEN:** Yeah, that's like something my wife that she says that means I'm not a real Nebraska fan. Says Nebraska fans don't have-- you, you can't have a second team. I will tell you-- you know, property down in Omaha. Stayed there last weekend when--

**ROBERT SABIN:** Oh, great.

**ANDERSEN:** --my wife and I celebrated our anniversary. Went to Kid Rock, came back. You guys had a rocking party in the lobby. It was fantastic. We had a blast.

**ROBERT SABIN:** That was a-- that was an experience, I'm sure. Yeah. That was, that was a night.

**ANDERSEN:** It was, it was well done. We had a great time.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Great. Well, thanks for that. And we'll, we'll certainly pass along those nice comments to the team. We, we-- you know, the team loves getting this feedback. It's-- you know, the hospitality industry is one where the people that are in it love it because it's that one-on-one engagement with people. And I know that's why I got in it. And now oftentimes I'm in offices or committees or things like that and I don't get as much a chance to do that. But I'll tell you, our team, our frontline team loves it. So I'm going to share that with them.

**ANDERSEN:** Yeah. They came-- we came from a rocking concert with Kid Rock. He killed it. Then we come back over to the hotel expecting, oh, yeah. We'll have a nightcap, go to bed. No. These guys had a DJ out there. It was bumping, thumping. The drinks were flowing. All the women are out dancing. You know, it was just fantastic. So your team did a great job.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Thank you. Thank you. We'll share that.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you for your testimony. Is there-- or-- we received no letters. Any proponents for Mr. Sabin? Any in the opposition? Neutral? Mr. Sabin, thank you for-- or, thank you for your time.

**ROBERT SABIN:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** So we'll now move on to Ms. Creekmeier. Is that--

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**RACHEL KREIKEMEIER:** Kreikemeier.

**ANDERSEN:** Kreikemeier. My apologies.

**RACHEL KREIKEMEIER:** You're fine.

**ANDERSEN:** Welcome to the Military, Government and Veteran Affairs Committee.

**RACHEL KREIKEMEIER:** Well, good afternoon, Senator Andersen and committee members. Thank you today for hearing my testimony. My name is Rachel Kreikemeier, spelled R-a-c-h-e-l; Kreikemeier is K-r-e-i-k-e-m-e-i-e-r. And as you can imagine, I give my kids very short names since they had to learn how to spell a very long last one. So I'm honored to be considered for this appointment to the Tourism Commission. A little bit about me. I'm going to start in my younger years and kind of progress through to how I got here today. Lifetime Nebraska resident here. Grew up in central Nebraska, which people from the eastern side of the state consider western Nebraska, anything west of Lincoln-- my husband being one of them. So we joke about that. I grew up in central Nebraska, south of Kearney, in a small town called Alma, Nebraska, on Harlan County Reservoir. Leaving there, going to college in Fremont, meeting my husband, landing in Nebraska City for about five years. And then we are now close to Beatrice in Gage County. So just south of here. Everywhere we have been and everywhere I have been in my life has always had some sort of tourism draw to it. And, and as I was listing-- listening to my colleague's testimony earlier, what most people come and tour right now we did as field trips in, in school and things like that. You talk about the Sandhill cranes. I saw them every year for three years kind of thing. I thought, well, why, why is this so cool? And now, obviously growing up and, and becoming wiser, you realize how-- what those impacts have on our communities and our state as a whole. And, and so really my, my role here today is similar to Courtney's, is I am-- my day job is an economic developer. In my entire career, I have really been in the workforce development realm. So some sort of tie to economic development. My passion is really in people. I am a connector of people and resources. Obviously, on the economic development side, we focus on people, recruitment, attraction, business and industry recruitment and attraction. So a lot of the conversation we have, chicken and the egg. Right? Is that the business to bring the people or is it the people that bring the business? So really, my excitement about working with the Tourism Commission and with the staff at Visit Nebraska I think will really help highlight our state to the rest of the world, which is something that in economic development we do every day. When I started in this

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role at NGage-- the economic development organization in Gage County-- similar to Courtney. You get, you get right in there and, and you make sure that your branding and your messaging is the same across the board so that when I'm promoting my community and my county to the rest of the world, both nationally and internationally, that we have the same messaging. Whether you get on our site or the tourism site, if-- the, the messaging is there and it's similar across the board. And, and now in economic development across the state, we know and champion that what is good for each of our areas is good for Nebraska. So it's a known thing that we're not going to compete against each other, because it all benefits us in the end. So I'm really excited and looking forward to, to getting to assist with that, that state marketing campaign and helping to recruit people here to, to enjoy and love and take advantage of what we, we have and get to see and visit every day. So with that, I will take any questions.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you very much. Any questions for Ms. Kreikemeier? Seeing none. Thank you very much for your testimony.

**RACHEL KREIKEMEIER:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** We received no letters. Are there any proponents for Ms. Kreikemeier? Any opponents? Any testifiers in the neutral capacity? Seeing none. We'll close the hearing on Ms. Kreikemeier. And we'll move on to Mr. Kuhn. Mr. Kuhn, welcome to the Government, Military and Veteran Affairs Committee.

**ROGER KUHN:** Vice Chair Andersen, members of the committee. My name is Roger Kuhn, R-o-g-e-r K-u-h-n. I appreciate being nominated for this position. I am the current commissioner on the Tourist Commission; have been for about ten years. A long time. I-- I'm kind of sorry I missed that party at the, the Hilton that Mr. Sabin didn't invite me to, but he's, he's always been very good to me, so it's, it's on me. But that sounded like a great time. I'm kind of sorry I missed that. And before I forget, I'd like to-- Senator Cavanaugh, could you tell your dad hi for me? I remember him from back in the day, way back in the day in the '80s. And so I've been around a while, but. But, yeah, my background I'll go in briefly. I grew up near Louisville, Nebraska out in the country, west of Louisville. And I-- I'm assistant director with the Game and Parks Commission and have been with the Game and Parks Commission for over 40 years. A long time. And I got started in that growing up at Louisville, going to Louisville state lake. Spent a lot of time there. Got my interest going in, in that arena. And from there, I graduated from UNO, Business Administration degree, working for the Game and Park Commission as an hourly employee through those years. I

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was fortunate enough to be hired full time to the Game and Parks Commission upon my graduation from Game and Parks. I was superintendent project manager for the Mahoney State Park development project. So I was out there as a young person. Great opportunity. Originally, when we acquired that property, it was just a farm. No interchange on the interstate. Pretty raw. Dirt gravel road out there, you know, to Ashland. So I had a great opportunity and got involved in that heavily as a superintendent of that project in that park. We started that project in '87, opened in '91 to the public, and ran that park or operated that park on behalf of the Game and Parks Commission for a number of years. And then, you know, have worked in Lincoln since then. I oversaw our state parks department statewide for over 20 years. My current capacity as assistant director, I do a lot of things. One of the primary things I do is I, I do a lot of fundraising. I, I work a lot with the philanthropic community across Nebraska, a lot of the companies and corporations. So a lot of the things you see, a lot of the development you see, the Game and Parks Commission is through fundraising efforts, private-public partnerships. So I'm, I'm very experienced in that working in that capacity for a very long time. And working for the Game and Parks Commission kind of goes hand in glove with the tourism industry. A lot of our parks are some of the top tourist attractions in the state; have been for a long time. You know, you take Lake McConaughy, Fort Robinson, Mahoney State Park, Ponca State Park-- we have eighty state parks statewide. So I've been personally involved in, you know, all those parks. I've traveled the state extensively. I think I've been-- I know I've been in every community in the state, a lot of them multiple times. So that experience is important, working in the tourism and on the Tourism Commission, being well-acquainted with the state. You know, at the Game and Parks Commission, of course we attract people from all over the country, also from all over the world. We get family reunions, so forth, so on. So it is a very rewarding career, very rewarding to work both Game and Parks Commission, serve on the commissions, the Tourism Commission to see the reaction that we get from people that visit Nebraska. I've, I've personally have seen that many, many times. A family will host a reunion at one of our parks. It might be a wedding. It might be grad-- people have never been to a state park, never been to Nebraska, but their relatives get married, come back to Nebraska. They'll come to Nebraska. They'll visit the local tourist attraction. And the feedback is always very, very positive. And, and like I say, that is very rewarding to see, to have a hand in that. But in all my years, in over 40 years working with Game and Parks and working with the Tourism Commission when it was under DED and now that it's an independent agency-- in my experience, I got to tell you, I think the

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Tourism Commission today has moved the needle further than all my years. Not just because I'm on the commission. I'm being very honest and transparent about that. We have really done-- you heard Mr. Sabin mention there's a survey done [INAUDIBLE] have been done for many, many years. It's very simple survey. What state are you most likely to visit? Nebraska's ranked 49th or 50th in that survey for a long, long time. In the last four to five years, we've moved up to 42nd. That's a big move. That tells you they're doing something right. We're getting a lot more exposure out there. People are noticing Nebraska. And if we can get people to Nebraska-- I mean, I know all of you have had experiences. You go visit somewhere, you think about it, you see it, you look at it. You think, that'd be a place I'd like to live or relocate or take my business. It, it can really have an impact. But first step is getting here oftentimes to see what Nebraska has to offer. And that experience is priceless, really. So with that, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

**ANDERSEN:** Mr. Kuhn, thanks for your testimony. Any questions from the committee? Yes, Senator Guereca.

**GUERECA:** Thank you, Vice Chair Andersen. Thank you, Mr. Kuhn, for being here. What's your favorite state park?

**ROGER KUHN:** Oh, my God. Are you kidding me? That-- that's a tough question. I'm not going to answer that, you know. They're all great state parks. And, and the beauty of our state park system is it a very-- is very diversified. You know, you have a Mahoney State Park that is very highly developed. That is not for everybody. You know, over the years and when I was there to develop, we got some criticism. You know, what, what are we building a Disney World in Nebraska for? But there is a niche for that. It's proven to be true. But yet we have other parks that are very mo-- quiet. It depends on the experience you're looking for. Fort Robinson is so diverse. 20,000-acre state park. Tons of history there. Great outdoor recreation. There's facilities and accom-- it offers a little bit of everything. So it just kind of depends on what you're-- looking like. We've had pressure to develop some of our properties. We want to see more-- we, we by design say, no, we're not interested. We may have somebody that's willing to donate money towards that effort. We're not-- we want that park to remain quiet, nice, serene, what have you. Indian Cave State Park is an example of that, southeast Nebraska. Was talking to a senator earlier about Fremont, his district, state lakes. We've done a ton. We're currently doing improvements there on our campgrounds with their electrical hookups, full-service hookups. But that, that question is just-- I got to dodge that question, as you can see, because I, I would

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be criticized from other people in the state, so. But we have a great-- we have a great park system, a great tourism commission as well.

**GUERECA:** Great answer, sir. Thank you.

**ROGER KUHN:** Yeah.

**ANDERSEN:** Artful answer. Any other questions? Yes.

**SANDERS:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** Senator Sanders.

**SANDERS:** Thank you, Senator Andersen. Sorry I wasn't here. I was in another hearing introducing a bill to bring people here from, from out of state, so. When they come here, they love our parks. So thank you for being part of this--

**ROGER KUHN:** Well, thank you for that compliment. And we're very proud of that. And, you know, the other question I [INAUDIBLE] you ask Commissioner Sabin about-- I've, I've been on the commission a long time and, and you say, well, what's, you know, some of the things I can see? One thing we did is we adjusted our strategy with our director, John Ricks. When he came on board, he had a lot of experience from other states, private experience in the marketing industry as well. Came from Colorado as a deputy director of tourism. Big job. Big-time job. Tourism in Colorado, big. He brought to the table a different strategy. Let's, let's try to promote Nebraska more on-- in out-of-state markets. We need to bring outside money to Nebraska, you know, versus, versus market so much in Nebraska. We're heavily marketing within Nebraska. Let's bring people from out of Nebraska. Those are new dollars to the state, more economic development, more bang for your buck. And that has really proved-- you heard about the Chicago market. That is a new market we started into. We've gotten a lot of exposure from doing that. And I think we, we can really grow Nebraska's exposure in a good way and get more people here. And, and there's a reason-- you know, I use this example. Why do you think you hear Pepsi, Coke-- you hear Marriott, you hear Hilton, you hear a lot of big corporations. There's a reason they spend millions and billions of dollars on marketing their product-- because it's investment. It works. They wouldn't do it if it didn't work. It's proven to work. Well, our product is Nebraska, and we need to invest dollars in marketing our product to those outside markets. Otherwise, they won't know about us. And so, you know, our budget being \$9 million a year is one of the lowest in the United States. [INAUDIBLE] bottom five, maybe

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bottom three. And so it's important-- we stretch those dollars a long way. But when those dollars get reduced or cut back, we're really cutting off our own head to some respect because they parlay into a lot of economic dollars. So that's something I'd like to see the commission do, is-- and this Legislature do is make sure we're funded appropriately with our lodging tax that we get, so.

**SANDERS:** Thank you.

**ROGER KUHN:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** Thank you, Mr. Kuhn. Any other questions, comments? Sir, thank you for your time and your testimony.

**ROGER KUHN:** Thank you.

**ANDERSEN:** We have no letters on this appointee. Anybody testifying a-- in the pro-- as a proponent? As an opponent? Or the neutral position? Seeing none. That concludes our hearing on the appointment of Mr. Kuhn, and it concludes our hearing for the day.