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MINNESOTA

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Two Campgrounds, One 'Off-Road Capital'

WORKING TOGETHER TO WELCOME THE OFF-ROADING COMMUNITY

By Paul Skrbec

Gilbert's Tom Smith is no stranger to building and serving the community.

Soon after retiring from the Gilbert Police Department where Smith served for 15 years, he quickly decided to run for Mayor. As a police officer, he often found himself in situations where he had to listen and observe before responding. In November, he was elected and took office in January and has spent much of his time so far listening to community members and reviewing data.

"Coming into a new job and a new role is always filled with challenges, but we have a lot of great assets in town and great people who give of themselves to make things better," Smith said. "We've recently made a number of infrastructure investments – like our new main street – but now we need to prioritize our economic growth. And tourism plays a big role in that growth."

WEST FORTY RV PARK AND CAMPGROUND

Paul Skrbec, who took over West Forty RV Park and Campground from his dad, Leo, a few years ago, is also playing a big role in helping the town focus on tourism.

"Off-roading tourism is king in Gilbert and we need to focus on the amenities people need when they come to visit the Iron Range Off Highway Vehicle State Recreation Area," Skrbec said. "There is a wide range of things that people look for when visiting. We're always eager to work with the City to figure out the best way to highlight what we have or to bring in new things that we need."

In addition to running his own campground, Skrbec serves as the chairperson for Gilbert's Campground Board which makes recommendations about Sherwood Forest for the City Council. This helps the City set priorities and make investment decisions that focus on things that affect visitors most. In the last few years, they've helped identify several projects that have recently been completed or are in the planning stages.

FOCUSING ON DIFFERENT GUEST NEEDS

Sherwood Forest first opened about 40 years ago with its primary campers focusing on lake and beach activities. When the OHV park opened in 2004, the mix of customers began to change rapidly. Ever since, Sherwood has focused on making improvements to adapt to off-road customers. West Forty, by contrast, opened the same year as the OHV park and was able to design its entire space with the needs of off-roading in mind.

This season, Sherwood will open up four updated campsites which previously only had limited utilities; this season they have been improved to full hookup sites. The City has also added three new sites with full hookups that are all a bit longer than older sites in the Sherwood Forest campground. They are also adding a new picnic pavilion that will be available for guests to use this year. It's a big nod to the changing needs of campers.

"We are always evaluating how guests use our campground and how they would like to use it in the future," said Smith. "A lot of our guests come for off-roading, but they also want to enjoy the clear water of our lake and beach. We are starting to focus on making some much needed repairs to roads throughout the campground and to find a way to replace the stairway to the beach that was removed several years ago."

Re-establishing a connection to the beach area will help Sherwood better deliver some of its existing features. Last fall, Sherwood also added kayak rentals so campers had another way to enjoy Lake-Ore-Be-Gone – and they've been a big hit so far!

West Forty on the other hand, is opening up seven new big-rig-friendly full hookup sites and continues to work on a new restroom/shower building that will eventually more than double restroom and

SCAN ME
to learn more
about the West
Forty RV Park



shower capacity.

"Our focus is 100 percent on off-roading and the amenities that can be really helpful to the sport. That's why we've added extra-large campsites. Our guests #1 request is to have space for vehicles, trailers and all the things that come with them," Skrbec said. Last season, the campground added free air so riders don't need to worry about bringing a compressor with them to air-up after they ride. And this season, they will have a new, dedicated parking area for maintenance and repairs of off-road vehicles. This area will provide a safe place for repairs and should reduce the wear and tear on campsites which can affect future guests.

Skrbec added, "We're turning the switch on Gilbert's first electric vehicle (EV) charging station this spring right next to our repair zone. When we decided to move forward with EV charging, we also wanted to make sure it could be a multi-use station that could serve as a stable power source to support arc welding for some of the types of repairs common to off-roading."

The charging station will be located in a new parking lot adjacent to the new restroom/shower building; it runs on a dedicated circuit which is isolated from campsites.

SUPPORTING AN OFF-ROAD CAPITAL

One of the city's big shared priorities is clear – grow the tourism community that supports the town. That means working together toward a goal of ensuring the entire town of Gilbert benefits from the people who come to ride at the OHV park.

"I'm always concerned about the big picture and how what I do at my camp-



SCAN ME

to download the campground map

ground affects the rest of the town," said Skrbec. "I always make a point of letting guests know where the gas station, liquor store, and restaurants are as well as the easiest way to get there. I want all of the businesses in town to see the benefits of people who come to enjoy our off-road areas."

Much of that philosophy is shared by Sherwood as well. The city's master plan for the campground has been a guide for growth over the past few years. It offers ideas on how to use assets like the nearby recreation center and hockey arena in coordination with the campground, beach and area trails.

"We see a future where we can go from being a 'city with campgrounds' to a true recreation area, compete with more trails, more activities and continue to make Gilbert an active recreation destination," Smith said. "Improving our recreation amenities will bring more people which will bring more revenue to our local busi-

nesses and that helps us to continue moving our town forward." The City of Gilbert already uses its hockey arena to support large events like the annual Crawl 4 the Cure and last year's MN4WDA Spring Convention. Part of the pains of growth includes more traffic – of all kinds. That means working to improve signage throughout the town so that visitors know the routes where they can drive with ATVs, side-by-sides, and Jeeps/buggies. It helps to keep the city safe while also addresses the concerns of traffic on the larger community by reducing the negative impacts of tourism on citizens.

"Our board has engaged with the police department and continues to work with the community to manage the increased off-road traffic we see each season," said Skrbec. "We're hoping to create a local map that we can hand out at both campgrounds when people check-in so they know the correct places to ride. My ex-

perience has been that when you provide guides like these, 99 percent of the people do their part in abiding by the rules of the road."

It's in the small things where the cooperation between campgrounds helps the entire town. "There are things that our Board sees that can sometimes be a blind spot for the city. Their advocacy continues to help us plan for the future," Smith said. Mayor Smith and Skrbec have regular conversations to help keep each other updated and figure out the most efficient way to approach issues that affect tourism.

West Forty RV Park is a privately-owned campground, business associate member of MN4WDA and a business member of ATV MN. You can make reservations online at www.WestFortyRVPark.com.

Sherwood Forest is owned and managed by the City of Gilbert. You can make reservations by linking to the campground booking system from www.Gilbertmn.org or by calling 218-748-2221. MW

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