



# HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Missouri Parks Association  
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Susan Flader, Editor

## The State of the Parks is Promising

by Kendra Varns Wallis

MPA members gathered virtually on October 6 for the State of the Parks address by new Director David Kelly and Deputy Director Brian Stith. During the presentation, members were updated about current and future projects, as Missouri State Parks (MSP) continues to tell the state's history and preserve Missouri's legacy through new opportunities and investments. In the discussion that followed, members were excited about MSP's commitment to stewardship of natural and cultural resources, and also about the proposed upgrades to the infrastructure of our state's remarkable natural, historic, and cultural treasures. Our state parks are more popular than ever with over 16 million visitors the first nine months of this year.

One of the biggest undertakings ever for Missouri State Parks is 28 projects to be funded by revenue bonds at 22 different parks across all regions of the state. The bonds in Gov. Parsons' budget were authorized during the 2021 legislative session and \$60.2 million in bonds were sold on Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. In response to demand for more lodging opportunities, the revenue bond project proposal included numerous campground expansions and full-service cabins, as well as camper cabins and yurts. The projects were identified and selected using occupancy data for camping and lodging, visitor comments and park staff recommendations. These are the first revenue bonds issued for state parks in decades; they are expected to be repaid from earnings of the new facilities within ten years.

The first four projects are projected to break ground in 2022; they include: new cabins at Johnson's Shut-Ins, new campsites and campground upgrades at Montauk and Roaring River, and electrical upgrades at Onondaga Cave. Renovations are slated to start in 2024 on an historic stone lodge at Babler

It has been a leader nationally in both natural and cultural resource preservation since the 1970s (see *Heritage*, December 2017 and February 2019). In 2020, the Natural Resource Program implemented a stewardship tracker on which field staff at every park enter the number of hours by stewardship activity on a monthly basis. As of June 2021, Deputy Director Brian Stith reported, MSP had its first full year of data, July 2020 through June 2021: 39,463 total hours have been recorded. Fireline preparation for prescribed burning, invasive species management, and ecological restoration, and biological identification and survey are some of the activities being tracked and accomplished.

Cultural stewardship is modelled on the natural resource effort to train and engage field staff throughout the system. Efforts of the current initiative have emphasized completing computerized inventories of cultural artifacts in the collections of each park; updating cultural resource management plans and abstracts of the plans for each park, using a template developed by staff leaders. Most parks now have abstracts prepared, at least in draft, Stith reported. The State Historic Preservation Office also has now transitioned to digital submission of applications for historic preservation tax credits.

Many in MPA were relieved to hear Stith report MSP's progress on its long-sought project to restore more natural hydrologic and ecosystem function and enhance recreation opportunities at Big Oak Tree State Park by reclaiming the age-old Grassy Pond and cypress swamp.

(See "State of Parks" on Page 4)



State Park built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1938 and more recently used by the Division of Youth Services. To preserve this historic structure, the park division is analyzing potential uses, which could include an event venue for retreats or corporate meetings. The renovation is estimated to cost approximately \$3.1 million, based on square footage costs for renovating an historic structure. Construction of all 28 projects is scheduled over a five-year period; a project timeline with detailed cost estimates can be found at <https://mostateparks.com/revenue-bonds>.

In addition to long planned construction projects, Missouri State Parks has been active on the stewardship front.

President's message by Terry Whaley:

## Rockbridge Gathering

It's been a busy year for MPA, and the activities and engagement of our members was reflected in the 39th annual membership gathering held at Rockbridge State Park on September 11-12. Former State Park Director--now new DNR Deputy Director--Mike Sutherland and new DNR Director Dru Buntin were on hand to give a very informative update on several park issues and outline the direction they see for Missouri and the State Park Division for 2022.

Our theme for the meeting was "Strengthening Park Partnerships." I was honored to lead a panel discussion on a wide spectrum of challenges and issues groups face in managing successful partnerships. With eight other park partner groups present, the Q&A was enlightening. One outgrowth from the morning was interest in an initiative for MPA to renew its efforts to engage with and develop information sharing and outreach opportunities with our friends groups.

Perhaps the most eye-opening presentation of the morning was a report from Bethany Haid, Friends of Rockbridge education and UPOP coordinator, who spends countless hours developing and presenting educational outdoor curricula for Columbia area youth. Too many board meetings inside, and we often forget the commitment of the folks in the field working directly with future park supporters. There are many Bethanys out there and we owe them all our gratitude for the work they do.

Park Superintendent Sarah Jones and Friends of Rockbridge President Kevin Roberson were wonderful hosts for the weekend. Saturday afternoon included two choices for getting our feet on the ground and enjoying what Rockbridge has to offer. Our insiders tour included the Hickam cabin, the MSP archaeological collections building, and the warehouse with caving equipment. Our featured hike was exploring Gans Creek Wild Area and learning of possible impacts from a proposed local development directly adjacent to the park that would result in runoff to Gans Creek and threaten the visitor experience of Rock Bridge

and its wild area.

Our Saturday evening picnic was highlighted with a presentation by Dan & Connie Burkhardt about work initiatives along the Katy Trail by the Katy Land Trust, Magnificent Missouri, and many volunteers. MPA members present were very appreciative of receiving a copy of their book *Missouri River Country*, which they created and edited to inspire greater public appreciation for the river.



Bethany Haid and daughter Clare

Many people worked hard to make this year's annual meeting a success, and our Executive Director Kendra Varns Wallis was an excellent traffic director keeping everyone on task and on schedule. Speaking of Kendra, the board of directors voted at their meeting on Sunday to transition her from a contractor to MPA's first full-time employee. Breaking new ground for both MPA and Kendra, we are all excited for the possibilities this will offer to more efficiently administer MPA activities. The workload is a challenge and the opportunities are incredible. We feel good with Kendra in the game with us.

As mentioned, this was the 39th year for an MPA membership meeting, which makes 2022 our 40th anniversary. You'll be hearing much more about plans for the 40th, and if you



have ideas or would like to become involved in our 40th year activities please contact myself or Kendra.

## Rock Bridge Development Update

The proposed Canton Estates development on a ridge directly adjacent to the Gans Creek Wild Area in Rock Bridge State Park (see *Heritage*, June 2021, p2) is on hold for now but still a threat to the park. Friends of Rock Bridge, the local Sierra Club chapter, and many neighbors and park supporters packed hearings last spring before both Columbia's Planning and Zoning Commission and its City Council to explain the threats. Many MPA members and other park supporters around the state responded to alerts by writing to Columbia officials to ask for their support of the park. Such efforts matter. The Council voted overwhelmingly against the requested annexation of the development into the city as planned.

Developers then submitted a revised plan in August for nearly as many houses (103 as compared with the original 113) on smaller lots in the northern part of the property to reduce the runoff directly into Gans Creek, one of only 44 designated State Outstanding Resource Waters in Missouri. In the new plan, as park advocates pointed out, the runoff would now be diverted to Clear Creek, which also flows through the park, and it would likely be increased because of the greater density of development and considerably higher percentage of impervious surfaces (roofs, driveways, sidewalks). The new plan was deemed too similar to the original, so developers must now wait until February to resubmit.

In the meantime, the local coalition of park supporters, Gans Creek Allies, are asking for an 18-month moratorium on all annexation and zoning changes in a larger area bordering the park and appointment of a task force to plan for a conservation overlay for the area in order to protect the park and other sensitive areas. MPA has already signaled its support for such planning. If you know of any possible models for dealing with such a problem, please contact MPA Executive Director Kendra Varns Wallis at [info@missouriparks.org](mailto:info@missouriparks.org).

## New Leadership for DNR and State Parks

In the wake of DNR Director Carol Comer's sudden passing in June 2021 (see *Heritage*, June 2021), Deputy Director Dru Buntin was appointed acting director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, setting in motion a chain of new appointments within the agency as each vacancy, many of them filled



from within, created other openings to be filled. Because Buntin had overseen DNR's State Park Division as part of his responsibilities as deputy, the transition was seamless for Missouri State Parks (MSP) and Buntin was widely hailed by MPA and other park supporters.

On August 11, Governor Mike Parson announced that he had named Dru Buntin the new director of the Department of Natural Resources, effective immediately. On August 31, Buntin named State Park Director Mike Sutherland as deputy director of DNR, with oversight of State Parks, the Missouri Geological Survey, and the Division of Energy. At the same time, he named 35-year veteran of the park division David Kelly as the new director of state parks. Then on October 15 Kelly announced 25-year state park veteran Laura Hendrickson as his replacement as deputy director of operations for state parks. Three more cheers!

From a five-generation family of Missourians, Dru Buntin—who started the chain reaction—initially joined DNR in 2000 as director of governmental affairs and later became deputy director for policy and chief of water resources. With extensive knowledge of policy and management issues related to the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, he left for Minnesota in 2013 to take over as executive director of the interstate Upper Mississippi River Basin Association, then returned in 2017 to Missouri DNR as deputy director. In addition to overseeing water resources, state parks, and other DNR programs, he also filled in as needed for

DNR Director Comer during her struggle with cancer.

Mike Sutherland, who had been a strong supporter of state parks during his four terms as a state representative and then as a board member of MPA, was appointed deputy director for administration of the state park system in June 2017, at the same time as Ben Ellis of Alaska was appointed state park director and David Kelly was appointed deputy director for operations (see *Heritage*, June 2017). With a background in communication and a masters degree in public affairs, Sutherland had also served as Warren County Assessor, executive director of the Boonslick Regional Planning Commission, and policy director for the Missouri Budget Project before joining MSP. When Ellis retired in November 2019, he became acting director of state parks, and then in January 2020 was appointed director. During his time with parks he strongly supported staff engagement in both natural and cultural resource stewardship throughout the system, handled special projects, and developed the proposal for \$64 million in revenue bonds approved in the 2021 legislative session.



David Kelly started as a seasonal employee in 1986 conducting surveys while completing his MU degree in parks and recreation, then was hired full-time in 1988 as a special events coordinator. He then



moved to leadership positions in visitor services, marketing, and facilities services. During a six-month period of uncertainty in 2017 in the midst of a political transition in the governor's office, an extremely difficult legislative session, low staff morale, and massive flooding, it was Kelly who kept the ship righted by working three jobs—

his own post, interim director of operations, and essential functions of state park director as well—before officially being appointed deputy director for operations in June (see *Heritage*, June 2017). Then, with both the director and his fellow deputy new to the system, Kelly was critical to briefing the new leaders and involved in discussion of every major problem and decision, experience that serves him well for the top role.

Laura Hendrickson, who grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and earned a degree in parks, recreation and tourism with a minor in forestry on a volleyball scholarship at the University of Florida (see *Heritage*, Dec 2017), is similarly well suited to take over Kelly's role as state park division deputy for operations. She was in charge of operations for 26 of the largest and most visited parks in the system as Ozarks Region director in Lebanon for the past eight years and in various leadership roles in the park system for 17 years before that, including as superintendent at Prairie, Capitol Complex, Pomme de Terre (with oversight of Ha Ha Tonka and Harry S Truman State Parks), and the South Central Management Unit. In her new role she oversees all the state park regional offices as well as the business services and visitor services programs. She joins Brian Stith as a fellow deputy and quarter century veteran of the system.



Brian Stith, who grew up on a farm near Arrow Rock, was appointed MSP deputy director for natural and cultural resources, grants, recreation and interpretation planning and development, and the state historic preservation office in August 2020; (See "Leadership" on Page 4)



### ("Leadership" from Page 3)

these were largely areas that had been overseen by Mike Sutherland before he became state park director. He got his start in parks working with his mother from 1988-1992 as a seasonal tour guide for Friends of Arrow Rock, where both his paternal grandfather and maternal great grandfather had been superintendents, nearly spanning the years 1943-1972. With a degree in history, he began full time with state parks in 1995 at the Missouri State Museum in charge of the State Capitol tour program before shifting to the MSP Eastern Region and then to supervisor of the Southern Missouri Historic District.

With a leadership team of state park veterans supported by DNR leaders deeply committed to our parks and historic sites and a talented and dedicated park system staff, and at a time when new resources are becoming more available to deal with the large backlog of state park projects, the outlook for Missouri State Parks is indeed promising.

### National Award for Ken McCarty

Ken McCarty, director of MSP's natural resource management program, has been honored by the Natural Areas Association with its 2021 Carl N. Becker Stewardship Award. He has devoted his entire career, more than 35 years so far, to



making Missouri leadership of MSP stewardship efforts, State Parks and Ken himself acknowledged leaders in ecological restoration nationally.

A few examples: Ken has been a leader in the use of fire to restore tall-grass prairie at Prairie State Park, sand prairie at Wakonda, wet prairie at Pershing, oak savanna at Long Branch, Ha Ha Tonka, and Truman, pine woodland at Hawn and St. Joe, glades galore, and the full panoply of ecosystems at landscape scale at Taum Sauk and Johnson's Shut-ins. He has restored fens at St. Francois and cypress swamp at Big Oak Tree.

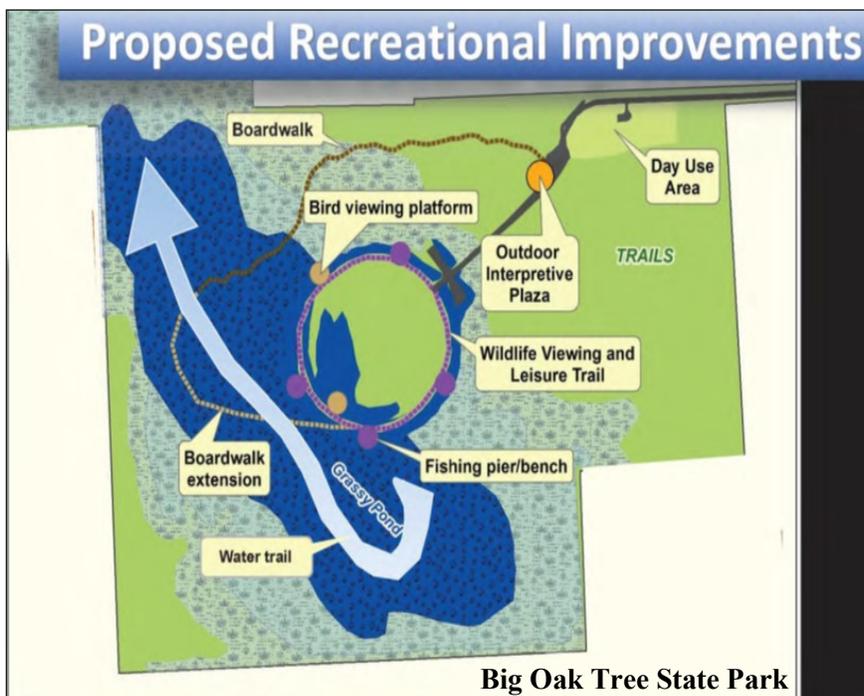
He has devoted decades to studying and dealing with major problems of hydrologic and ecosystem function at Pershing, Van Meter, Confluence, and especially Big Oak Tree. When the Taum Sauk Reservoir collapsed

and tore the heart out of Johnson's Shut-ins, it was Ken who used his incredible knowledge, his charm and powers of persuasion, and his persistence and dedication to devise methods and oversee restoration of hydrologic and ecosystem function in East Fork Black River both above and within the shut-ins. When there were funds from natural resource damage settlements available for buying more park lands, it was Ken who insisted on securing only properties that would advance the mission of the system and were suitable for restoration.

He has not done all this alone, of course, but by inspiring others through his vision and example. He has hired, trained, and mentored an outstanding crew of stewards for state parks. He has also developed protocols and training programs and inspired superiors and colleagues throughout the system to accept responsibility and engage personally in the stewardship mission at virtually every park and historic site in the system. Ken is a quiet, largely unsung hero of the park system. He richly deserves congratulations on this national award, but even more important, our profound thanks for what he has been doing all along for state parks.

### ("State of Parks" from Page 1)

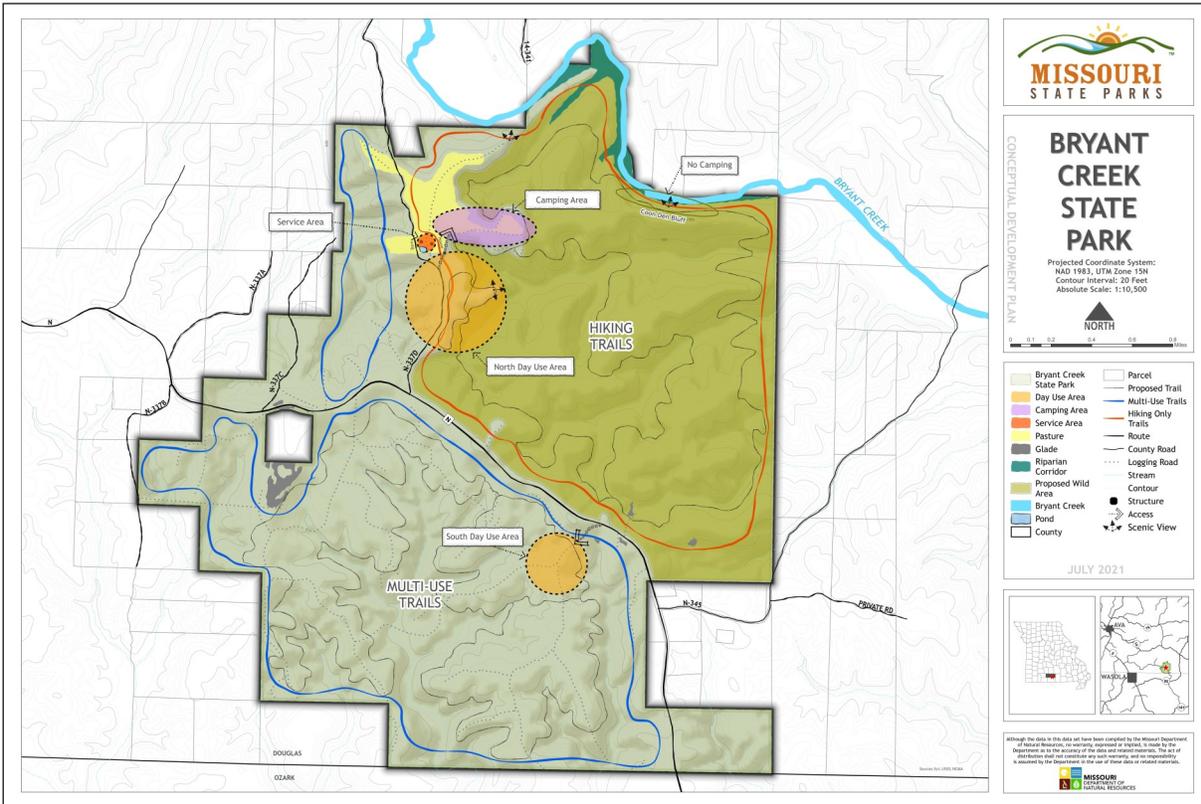
As a follow-up, MPA invited members to attend a Lunch and Learn Zoom presentation on the efforts at Big Oak Tree by Ken McCarty, nationally recognized Natural Resource Management Program Director. During the November 10 event, attendees learned about the history of the park's agricultural drainage problems, which were further complicated by the deliberate levee breach of the St. John's / New Madrid floodway during the flood of 2011 and are finally in process of being corrected. MPA has been advocating for restoration of this park for decades (see *Heritage* April 2002, June 2011, and August 2013).



Plans to reconnect the park to the Mississippi River and its flood plain are now funded through an EPA 319 grant for a perimeter berm with a water inlet from the west and an outlet to the east that will allow seasonal variation in water levels in “this puddle that’s Big Oak Tree State Park,” as McCarty put it. If all proceeds as planned with the final design, bidding, and construction, the work may be finished by late 2022. The trail on remaining portions of the berm around the man-made lake (1960) will remain but the considerably larger and older Grassy Pond is being restored. Improvements for recreation include extension of the boardwalk, fishing and bird observation areas, and a water trail with possible rental kayaks. This park that has been dying for decades bids fair to live on in a decidedly more resilient and healthy condition.

Mountain State Park is to provide natural resource stewardship that preserves and restores native glades and woodlands, protects the aquatic diversity and water quality of Roark Creek and its groundwater recharge areas, protects cultural elements, and provides outdoor recreation and interpretation opportunities that will foster appreciation of the natural and cultural resources provided by the area. At this point in the CDP process, MPA is pleased with the proposed goals and development objectives for the park.

Missouri State Parks staff have dealt with many hurdles in recent years, including losses and diversions of anticipated funding, legislative sniping (by certain individuals), and resulting lowered staff morale. For the past five years, however, DNR leadership has been emphasizing



Two of the four new park properties that were acquired during the Nixon administration have been going through the conceptual development planning (CDP) process (see *Heritage* December 2020). MPA is happy to report that MSP held the third and final CDP meeting for Bryant Creek State Park and the final plan is now available at [https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/BryantCreek\\_Final\\_CDP.pdf](https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/BryantCreek_Final_CDP.pdf). Director Kelly stated that once designs are complete, MSP can move towards construction, with the goal of completing phase 1--initial development in the north day-use area, including parking, vault toilet, and the first trail--in summer 2022. Funding for phase 2 will be requested through the 2022 legislative process to support development of the south day use area, including parking and a multi-use trail, as well as additional trails in the north area.

The second CDP meeting for Ozark Mountain State Park took place on November 2, 2022. The mission of Ozark

improving their relationship with the legislature and their efforts have paid off with a strong budget and the upcoming revenue bond projects. The current state of the park system overall is now very promising with strong public and legislative support, significant funding for long backlogged projects now in hand with more likely from recently approved and currently pending federal relief bills, and a rejuvenated, passionate and professional staff who strengthen the mission through their work.

All of this gives MPA and park supporters reason to be optimistic about the future of our state park system. As we look to the future, MPA will continue to work with MSP and DNR leadership, other public and legislative officials, and partner organizations to defend our parks and historic sites and the mission of our state park system. Stay tuned through *Heritage* and periodic emails and alerts to learn about ways you can participate and help during these exciting times!



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New Leadership for DNR and DSP*

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**Arrow Rock's Huston Tavern Reopens.** An October 8 ribbon cutting celebration marked the reopening of Arrow Rock's historic J. Huston Tavern (1834), the very first building in the state park system and the oldest continuously operating restaurant west of the Mississippi River, after a devastating fire in May 2019 that destroyed the kitchen, left soot everywhere in the building, and very nearly burned the whole structure to the ground. The hero of the firefight and of the return of visitor services at the tavern and of the October 8 ceremony was longtime site administrator and Arrow Rock historian Mike Dickey, who is retiring at the end of December after more than 35 years with MSP, the last 25 as Arrow Rock Administrator.

The fire occurred less than six months after Missouri State Parks (MSP) had officially transferred operations of the tavern, including the restaurant, to Friends of Arrow Rock, one of the oldest (1959), most active, and most successful friends groups in the park system (see *Heritage*, February 2019). The building was saved by the quick action of Mike Dickey, who happened to be station chief of the local volunteer fire department and knew exactly what to do to save the rest of the building. With help from MSP cultural resource staff, Dickey oversaw removal of all the furnishings and artifacts for cleaning, plus construction of a large wood platform for a dining tent which, along with a mobile kitchen, allowed Friends of Arrow Rock to resume food service less than a month later. By mid-August, Dickey had overseen the cleaning and repainting of the interior and return of the furnishings so the building's indoor dining rooms would again be available, a remarkable achievement.



What remained was to rebuild the new state-of-the-art kitchen and long-desired 24-hour public restrooms, for which Dickey had helped develop the plans and oversee the work. When the ribbon was cut October 8, Mike Dickey could look forward to retirement secure in the knowledge that Arrow Rock State Historic Site and the Huston Tavern would keep operating on into the future, and he could research and write more books.

**Hindman Junction Panels Unveiled.** A remarkably large crowd of perhaps a hundred old friends, family, current and former public officials, and intrepid bicyclists braved sub-freezing blustery winds to gather at Hindman Junction of the Katy and MKT Trails November 12 for the unveiling of panels detailing the long struggles for the two trails. Fortified by coffee and hot chocolate, they listened, laughed, and cheered as a lineup of fellow trail proponents--among them MC Vicki Russell, MSP Director David Kelly, former Rep. Chris Kelly, former Boone County Commissioner Don Stamper, former Congressman Russ Carnahan, and Axie Hindman--regaled them with stories of Hindman's pivotal and indispensable role in all phases of the struggle for the trails. Darwin Hindman,



who passed away in 2019 (see *Heritage*, October 2019), was a longtime loyal member of the MPA board both before and after his 1995-2010 tenure as Columbia's longest-serving mayor by far.

**Museum Exhibit Moved.** A traveling temporary exhibit developed by historians at UMKC on Kansas City's role in the formation of gay rights organizations and launch of the national movement, which opened in late August in the Missouri State Museum (run by Missouri State Parks) on the first floor of the Capitol as part of a series of Bicentennial exhibits, caught national attention when several members of the General Assembly questioned it and the exhibit was ordered to be removed. In response to query about the removal, a spokesperson for the Governor's Office explained that statutory process requiring coordination with the Board of Public Buildings had not been followed, though a recently retired director of the museum indicated that during his 24-year tenure he had never had to get the board's approval for exhibits. MPA quietly indicated to MPA and DNR its support for professional staff judgement in matters of this sort. The exhibit was subsequently reinstalled at Jefferson Landing, where it gets less visitation. The incident led to a brief flurry in social media as well as coverage by major media such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*.