

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Natural Resources Committee August 4, 2020

HUGHES: Welcome to the Natural Resources Committee. I'm Senator Dan Hughes. I'm from Venango, Nebraska, and I represent the 44th Legislative District. I serve as Chairman of the committee. Today we have one confirmation hearing for Donna Kush for appointment to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, which is within the committee's jurisdiction. I ask that you abide by the following procedures to better facilitate today's proceedings. Please silence or turn off your cell phones. If you are planning to testify-- we won't do that, nobody is testifying. The committee members with us today will introduce themselves, beginning on my far left.

MOSER: Hi, I'm Mike Moser from District 22.

HALLORAN: Steve Halloran, District 33.

QUICK: Dan Quick, District 35: Grand Island.

GEIST: Suzanne Geist, District 25: the east side of Lancaster County.

HUGHES: And on my right--

GRAGERT: Tim Gragert, District 40: northeast Nebraska.

ALBRECHT: Joni Albrecht, District 17: northeast Nebraska.

BOSTELMAN: Bruce Bostelman, District 23.

HUGHES: Bruce is Vice Chairman of the committee, and to my left is our committee counsel, Andrew Vinton, and to the far right is our clerk, Mandy Mizerski. You can wear your mask or not, you know, whatever you are comfortable with. So with that, we will open the confirmation hearing for Donna Kush to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Welcome, Ms. Kush. We appreciate you taking the time to come see us. And if you'd like to take just a few minutes and give us a little background on yourself and kind of your impressions-- I think you've been to a couple meetings of Game and Parks-- so your impressions of Game and Parks, please.

DONNA KUSH: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Senator Hughes and Senators Bostelman, Albrecht, Geist, Halloran, Gragert, Quick, and Moser, members of the Natural Resources Committee. I very much appreciate the opportunity to discuss my appointment to the Game and Parks Commission. As a lifelong Nebraskan, it is a great honor to be appointed to the Game and Parks Commission, and I do not take this lightly. I realize that I may not look like current or past commissioners. I am the second woman in Nebraska's history to be

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appointed. My resumé is 25-plus years in the corporate world, but there is much more to my story. I grew up in Monroe-- Monroe, Nebraska, a town of about 350 people in Senator Moser's district, where my graduating class had 11 students. I grew up with four older brothers and a father who toted me along to fish and check traps. We loved damp and warm spring mornings to hunt for mushrooms on my Grandma Kush's farm, near the Loup River outside of Genoa. We spent weekends being outdoors with my extended family of cousins, aunts, uncles, and my grandmother, who, in her 80s, was still driving her tractor. There is nothing like the thrill of catching multiple crappie on an early morning or wrestling in a bass or muscling in a jumbo catfish. Until the recent flathead catfish was broken this year, it was held by Bill Swanson, and I remember Bill's 80 pounder he caught in 1988. My brother Rich was with Bill when he caught it, and he helped, he helped care for it in a tank in his yard. Hunting was also very much part of my family's outdoor culture. As a youth, I learned how to shoot and I took hunter safety course. I'll admit I'm a fair weather fan of gaming and my version, these days, of hunting would be shooting clay pigeons. While my family and I had access to some of the richest natural resources in rural Nebraska, we also enjoyed time on state properties: camping at Lewis and Clark and Mahoney; boating and fishing at Calamus; and the NRD-run Davis Creek. In fact, my favorite picture of my dad and me, before he passed away a couple of years ago, was taken when we were hiking at Niobrara State Park. Living in Omaha has not hindered my outdoor lifestyle. I live next to the Zorinsky Lake. In fact, the Zorinsky Preserve is an extension of my backyard. Several days a week, I run on the trail with my two dogs, who are part retriever, of course. I enjoy canoeing, stand-up paddleboarding, hiking, and whether it's at a local lake, sandpit or river. I have an understanding and appreciation of the incredible resources our state has to offer, and I understand it is part of who we are as Nebraskans, part of our heritage and our culture to enjoy these rich resources and to care for them by conserving these rich resources. I have a great appreciation for the science behind our conservation efforts at the Game and Parks Commission and with our numerous local and national partners. My priority, as a commissioner, will be to help ensure that current and future Nebraskans are able to fully maximize our outdoor lifestyle and culture. My goal will be to help present our offerings so that we help build on our already strong base of users. This is where my upbringing and my resumé intersect. As a business leader, I am likely to take a different approach and have a fresh perspective. And that doesn't mean that I'll be aggressively pursuing profits. Those are helpful, but I will be aggressively pursuing the absolute best experience possible when our clients are using our Game and Parks' facilities, education, and offerings. Yes, I said clients,

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because I feel we need to think of every interaction as an opportunity to create an amazing experience and develop even more loyal and dedicated users who become advocates of Game and Parks. In fact, I believe there's a silver lining of this pandemic that we have to take advantage of at Game and Parks. We have a unique opportunity while people are craving outdoor activities. People are tired of being cooped up in their homes and, for safety, they do not want to travel out of state or on a plane. We need to maximize this time right now by giving everyone an amazing experience using our Game and Parks so they become not just COVID park users, but lifelong Game and Parks enthusiasts. For that reason, I am thrilled to be on the Parks Committee of Game and Parks. My background in communications, public affairs, public private partnerships, and philanthropy will be an asset in widening our current client base, enhancing the position and communications of our offerings, and broadening our engagement of potential partners, including: communities, education partners, nonprofits, and our generous philanthropists. In closing, I thank you again, Senators. I am grateful for your time and this opportunity to serve on the Game and Parks Commission and to serve all Nebraskans.

HUGHES: Thank you, Mrs. Kush. Are there questions from the committee? Senator Gragert.

GRAGERT: Thank you, Chairman Hughes. And thank you for showing up, coming up today. You answered my first question. I guess you're going to be interested in the parks part of the, of Game and Parks.

DONNA KUSH: Um-hum.

GRAGERT: What, if anything, in the Game and Parks, would you hope to change or, or see if there is anything to be changed?

DONNA KUSH: As I mentioned, I, I really think we can work on enhancing the experience that people have so that, especially right now during this time period-- I think we have a window for this next probably 9 to 12 months, of where people are a lot of first-time users of parks. And we need to make sure that it's not just a first-time use for them, but they-- we give them such a great experience that they want to come back. So in some areas that, that probably means enhancing, maybe, some of the facilities. You know, we've done some great work with the Venture Parks, the new Venture Parks that we have for those. I think we need to look at expanding those outside of just the current area that they are, in eastern Nebraska, and maybe looking at some of the enhancements of those in other areas, as well. I think our trails and, and some of our other parts of those facilities at our parks could also be enhanced, too, for users.

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GRAGERT: Thank you.

HUGHES: Additional questions? Senator Moser.

MOSER: Yeah. Which of my sisters do you know?

DONNA KUSH: I don't, I don't think I know any of your sisters, but I am in your district--

MOSER: Oh, district.

DONNA KUSH: --or I grew up in your district.

MOSER: My hearing is bad. Thank you.

DONNA KUSH: Oh, that's OK.

MOSER: I was going to-- I was trying to figure that out. I was going to call her up and get the real scoop on you.

DONNA KUSH: Oh, yes. Well, you could try, but it's been a while since I've been-- I grew up in Monroe, which is, as you know, right by Columbus.

MOSER: Yeah, yeah.

DONNA KUSH: Yep.

MOSER: They have the best hamburgers at that c-store.

DONNA KUSH: That-- I've heard breakfast sandwiches, too, are very quite good there.

MOSER: Yeah. Sometimes I drive over there to get a little advice from former Senator Rupp and get a hamburger.

DONNA KUSH: Um-hum.

MOSER: How did you happen to hear about this opening? Did the Governor approach you? Or did you send a letter of interest? Or how did you--

DONNA KUSH: The Governor approached me and, and obviously is looking for somebody in District 2. And I think that I complement the current commission in that, obviously I provide diversity. But obviously, I'm also a business leader. And as I said, I think I bring kind of a fresh perspective and a different perspective to, to the commission in how we look at things and how we operate, and making it probably a more engaging experience for more Nebraskans.

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MOSER: OK, thank you.

HUGHES: Additional questions from the committee? Senator Bostelman.

BOSTELMAN: Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for being here today and your willingness to serve. My question comes to-- I know that some commissioners spend a great deal of time traveling the state, talking with folks. There's a certain amount of, a number of meetings they do, but also they do a lot of traveling going down trails, going down to different facilities and that. Could you speak to what your thoughts are on how much time do you have to, or your willingness-- how much time do you have to offer to do those type of things outside of your normal meeting commitment for the Commission?

DONNA KUSH: Yes. Thank you, Senator Bostelman. And that's a very fair question, and you're right. So we have six meetings a year, and the majority of those are held out at facilities across the state. And those are pretty much two-day meetings. So I very much look forward to being able to experience some of the facilities that I perhaps have not been to yet. But in addition to that, I look forward to, whether it's with my family or, or as I'm going to some of those meetings, stopping and experiencing some of the other experiences while I'm out across the state.

BOSTELMAN: OK. Thank you.

HUGHES: Any additional questions? I've just got a couple. So you've had a couple of meetings so far--

DONNA KUSH: Two.

HUGHES: --as a commissioner? Has that been remotely or have you gotten together? Or--

DONNA KUSH: Those have been remote. Yes.

HUGHES: OK.

DONNA KUSH: But our next one, in, in a couple of weeks, we are going to-- I think the majority of us are going to be actually there and it's going to be at Mahoney.

HUGHES: OK, very good.

DONNA KUSH: Um-hum.

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HUGHES: So what's your impression of your first couple of meetings, just a quick-- working well, you know? And I understand-- for me, doing remote is very difficult. I'd like to have persons. So I appreciate you coming in today, but I--

DONNA KUSH: Oh, yeah.

HUGHES: --you know, just your impressions of the first couple of meetings, the subjects you're dealing with,--

DONNA KUSH: Um-hum.

HUGHES: --and, you know, problems, you know.

DONNA KUSH: Um-hum.

HUGHES: How's it going?

DONNA KUSH: I think it's been going very well. I think, you know, the first meeting was really focused on COVID and keeping employees safe. But also, as we started to look at opening up some of the facilities, some of the campground facilities, a lot of discussion was spent around that. And I felt like that the, the Game the Parks team had done a really good job of assessing how best to do that, and in a very, in a very safe manner, and opening kind of in phases with certain facilities. So a lot of that meeting was spent on that. I would say, at both meetings, one of the most impressive parts to me has been about the whole wildlife science piece of it. The team that we have at Game and Parks is very impressive. We have some really good science, scientists there who-- biologists who spend a, a great amount of time and have a great amount of passion for conserving our resources. So one of the most, you know, I would say, kind of critical decisions we had to make most recently was regarding mountain lions and whether or not to open up that season, but also, if so, how many would be included in that count for that. So the presentation, though, that was given by the team made it a very educational, not an emotional decision about what we could or, or-- could or should do in that situation. So it's-- as I said, that's been one of the most impressive things, I think, that I've experienced so far is just the discussion by-- of our wildlife science management and our conservation teams.

HUGHES: Have you had any discussion of limiting the out-of-state hunting licenses for the fall season? I know last spring we limited-- or stopped the sale of out-of-state spring turkey permits. Have you had any discussion about that yet?

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DONNA KUSH: Not on that one yet.

HUGHES: OK.

DONNA KUSH: We-- just on the other big game pieces, and, and there wasn't really anything talking about limiting them further--

HUGHES: OK, very good.

DONNA KUSH: --or anything. It was just a count.

HUGHES: Sure. Any other questions from the committee? Seeing none, thank you very much for coming in today; we appreciate it. So that will wrap up your portion. I will ask if there's anyone wishing to testify in favor of Ms. Kush's appointment to the Game and Parks? Seeing none, is there anyone wished to op-- to testify in opposition? Seeing none, anyone wishing to testify in the neutral capacity? Seeing none, that will close our hearing for Ms. Donna Kush to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

DONNA KUSH: Thank you, Senators.

HUGHES: Well, thank you very much for coming in.