

# NEWS RELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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(North Platte, Nebraska, May 8, 2024) – Visit North Platte hosted the 5<sup>th</sup> annual Excellence in Tourism Awards Luncheon on May 8<sup>th</sup> at Venue304. Forty-one nominations were submitted from the public for the seven award categories. The ‘Excellence in Tourism’ awards recognize outstanding customer service at hotels or other lodging establishments, restaurants or other food service establishments, events, attractions, and retail as well as Volunteer of the Year and Hero of Tourism. The nominees can either be individuals or businesses.

The Visit North Platte Board of Directors selected the award winners from the nominees based on the nominations submitted and the awards were presented to:

Excellent Service at an Attraction – Tyler Sexon, NPIce

Tyler has gone above and beyond to work hard and dedicate his time and financial support to get NPIce up and running. He has worked tirelessly to establish this rink so North Platte and all surrounding communities can come and enjoy something to do in the colder months of the year. Tyler is one of the most generous and supportive people North Platte could have!

Excellent Service at an Event – Dusty Barner, Dusty Trails Spring Birding Tours

Dusty Trails is a premier destination for all your outdoor adventures in North Platte. He provides a number of fulfilling outdoor experiences ranging from horseback riding through Buffalo Bill's original ranch, to floating down the iconic North Platte River in a tank, tube, canoe, or kayak. Just a few years ago Dusty took a leap into offering an experience that was outside his expertise, spring birding tours. For 3 weeks each spring Dusty offers a variety of Sandhill Crane tours and a morning Prairie Chicken Tour to visitors from all over the country, and beyond. He quickly became an expert on these birds and their behavior to give every guest an experience they won't forget. Beyond that, when he provides these tours, he talks about all the other great things visitors can do and see while in North Platte. He gives them a reason to come and then gives them more reasons to stay. He is a true gem to the community and should be recognized for it.

Excellent Service within a Hotel – Craig Warneke, Best Western Plus

Craig has been with Best Western Plus for the past 3 years. Within this time, Craig continuously gives his all into not only his position, but for the whole building, staff, and guests. Always willing to step up and help where needed to make sure the property maintains guest satisfaction. Craig shows his passion in everything he does by making sure things are done right the first time. Even when called in late at night or on his scheduled days off. And when you get the pleasure of

crossing paths with this guy, you can always count on him to have a joke lined up for a good laugh.

#### Excellent Service within a Restaurant – Chris Lane, Boss' Pizza and Chicken

Chris has come to North Platte and taken over this establishment and has made it a great place to get away, have a good meal, and a few beers. Chris is friendly, outgoing, and wants to be a part of the community. He has made a huge difference here! It's also a great spot to watch any sport, but especially local Nebraska games. He always puts the customer first and provides excellent service.

#### Excellent Service within a Retail Establishment – Michelle Wilson, Kwik Stop

Michelle goes above and beyond with every customer. She will run out to a pump to assist someone struggling. She doesn't direct customers where items are; she will walk out and assist them. She treats every customer with the same level of respect no matter their status or appearance. Her performance inspires me to continue to provide excellent customer service.

#### Volunteer of the Year – Cheri and Al Erickson, Wava Best, Betty Sones, & Judy Thompson, Prairie Arts Center

Cheri, Al, Wava, Betty, and Judy have spent the last 16 years dedicating their time, blood, sweat, and tears to the Prairie Arts Center. This group of people have not only helped create the arts center as a staple in downtown North Platte, they have spent the last 16 years volunteering their time to refurbish and restore the beautiful 1913 building, working the front desk, helping with fundraisers, working classes, bartending, making food and fostering a love of the arts in this community. Not only have they worked tirelessly for the last 16 years, without a complaint, but pure vibrancy for the arts...they continue to be a part of this great facility and the arts today. Their passion has created a home for the arts in Western Nebraska, but also a home where people can gather, create, and communicate. Without this group, the arts would not be as alive and vibrant as it is today.

#### Hero of Tourism – Nebraska State Senator, Mike Jacobson

In his sophomore year at the Nebraska Legislature, Senator Mike Jacobson, representing the 42nd District, had to dive into the deep end to protect tourism, not only for North Platte, but for tourism across the entire state. Working with local tourism professionals and the Nebraska Travel Association he helped amend four damaging bills. On the Governor's demand that the Nebraska Legislature reduce property tax by 40% this year, senators were looking for dollars everywhere and tourism tax dollars were a target. LB 1067 was introduced to eliminate the Nebraska Inheritance Tax over the next five years and proposed using Lodging Tax funds to replace the loss of income for the Counties. Senator Jacobson understood the devastating effect of allowing the counties to sweep tourism funds for non-tourism purposes. He worked with the introducer of the bill to amend it to strike the use of Lodging Tax. He showed his strong leadership and persuasive skills on the floor debate to secure the vote to approve the amendment. A bill that moved forward from last year's session LB624 proposing to put the Nebraska Tourism Commission back under the Department of Economic Development also made it to the floor for debate. An amendment was proposed by the introducing Senator to add two seats to the Nebraska Tourism Commission, one for DED and one for the Nebraska State Chamber and remove the language to put NTC back under DED. Sen. Jacobson was very vocal on the floor debate about NOT moving NTC back under DED impressing the importance of keeping the entities separate. He led debate to educate the legislative body on the importance

of keeping the Commission intact and led them to maintaining the amendment. The Appropriations Committee released its mid-biennium budget, LB1413 recommended a \$5 million dollar sweep from the State Visitors Promotion Fund (NEBRASKA Tourism Commission Budget). LB1412 suggested moving that money to the Department of Economic Development “for a statewide marketing campaign”. Sen. Jacobson (North Platte) filed an amendment to strike the provision of the Committee Amendment that sweeps the tourism funds and successfully stopped the sweep. Senator was quoted “I introduced a floor amendment to stop the transfer, which was ultimately successful. These funds are very important to attract more in-state and out-of-state travelers to visit attractions throughout Nebraska. Many of these attractions are located in District 42: Nebraskaland Days, the U.S. Highway 2 Scenic Byway, and the Nebraska Passport Program, to name a few.” District 42 is lucky to have a representative who can see the whole picture and is fighting for tourism as hard as he is. This is why Senator Mike Jacobson is a pure Hero of Tourism!

This year also included the first ever Lifetime Achievement Award presented to David Fudge, the outgoing Executive Director of NEBRASKAland DAYS.

David has been with NEBRASKAland DAYS since 2005. After his term as a board member, he was hired as the Executive Director. David has helped grow the celebration tremendously with bringing in huge-name Acts. David has volunteered for many different organizations including the North Platte Planning Commission, Ambassadors, Quality Growth Fund review committee, North Platte Public School Foundation, and is also very active in his church. The list could go on and on.

Visit North Platte would like to thank all their incredible tourism partners in Lincoln County that help make tourism successful each year, as well as all of the nominees and winners for their incredible contributions to our community!

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