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SARASOTA COUNTY

Paul Blackketter resigns as CEO of Nathan Benderson Park

Sports venue president will pursue consulting career

By [Katy Bergen](#)

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Last Friday, Paul Blackketter stood beside USRowing officials at a press conference and spoke about the growth of Nathan Benderson Park, the county-owned park he helped develop from a gravel pit to a 600-acre rowing and sports venue that hosted the Olympic Trials in rowing this past weekend.

USRowing, county and park officials spoke positively then about the people and partnerships they said had grown the park into a prestigious sports venue and community asset.

Four days later, Blackketter, the face of Nathan Benderson Park for the past seven years, announced abruptly that he will resign from his post as CEO of the Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates, the nonprofit that operates the park and is supported through a partnership between Sarasota County and Benderson Development, a private real estate firm whose deceased founder the park is named for.

On Tuesday, Blackketter informed the SANCA board in writing that he intends to step down from his \$159,650 post at Nathan Benderson Park and pursue a career in consulting. His resignation comes less than a month after the park's chief operating officer, Nicole Rissler, announced she would be leaving to take on a newly created role in the county Parks and Recreation department. Rissler had been with the organization for less than a year.

Blackketter maintained that the decision to leave the park before the venue hosts the 2017 World Rowing Championships was his own.

"It's 100 percent ... 1,000 percent my decision," Blackketter said Thursday. "No one has asked me to resign."

Blackketter said he had previously informed USRowing and the international governing body that he intended to leave SANCA and begin a business. He has agreed to serve as president through the remainder of the fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. The park board will start an international search for a replacement immediately, SANCA board president Bill Robinson said Thursday.

"We are going to select a world-class person that can continue to do as well as Paul has done in the past and carry us into the future," Robinson said.

A former Benderson Development employee, Blackketter was part of small group



SANCA President Paul Blackketter at Nathan Benderson Park in Sarasota on April 22.
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that traveled the world visiting rowing venues, studying whether the Sarasota County land just off the Interstate could be developed into an elite rowing park. The first regatta was held on the lake in 2009. In 2011, the county awarded Benderson Development a no-bid contract to dredge and shape the park, a \$30 million project funded through county tourist tax dollars and state funds. More than \$20 million in additional construction projects, such as a finish tower and boathouse, are planned for the park.

Randy Benderson, president of Benderson Development, praised Blackketter for his work in developing a "lasting jewel" in the community.

"I could not be more proud of Paul's accomplishments," Benderson said. "I don't think our community would be host to Olympic caliber events, NCAA Championships or Ivy League schools without Paul's efforts."

History of criticism

Despite praise from various public officials on Thursday, SANCA has weathered criticism and scrutiny over the years for issues that were often attributed to Blackketter.

In 2014, SANCA briefly lost its 501(c)3 status after Blackketter missed a deadline to submit the appropriate paperwork. While Benderson Development and other park boosters promised county officials it would find private dollars for construction projects planned for the park, fundraisers continued to request legislative funds each year. The park has received \$12.5 million from the state thus far, though some lawmakers have expressed disappointment in private fundraising efforts.

When the park's fundraising arm secured more than \$5 million for a finish tower that was supposed to be completed by the Olympic Trials this past weekend, paperwork and communication issues between county officials, SANCA and Benderson Development stalled the project for more than five months. A completion date for the project has been pushed to December 2016.

Perhaps most notoriously, Blackketter was the subject of a Youtube scandal this past fall, when a video of him cursing and screaming at a Benderson Development employee was posted on the Internet and viewed widely throughout the community.

It was later determined through a board-ordered investigation that Blackketter was defending a co-worker and was goaded into the altercation so that the employee could film it, but documents from the probe revealed that volatile outbursts from Blackketter were not uncommon. Witnesses who were interviewed described Blackketter as controlling, volatile, impatient and demanding, characteristics that a board-chosen investigator attributed in part to post-traumatic stress disorder. Blackketter was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, from 2003-2004. He told an investigator that American convoys were frequently hit with IED blasts and he knew men who were killed or wounded.

The SANCA board in December voted unanimously for Blackketter to keep his job if he received counseling. Blackketter said Thursday that "getting help" allowed him to realize that he had other ambitions.

"I was consumed by that park on so many different levels," Blackketter said. "For the first time in 10 years, since I got back from overseas, I was literally doing something for Paul.

"I'm going to take this energy that I have and I'm going to spend it on Paul, on my family and my own career."

While Sarasota County administrator Tom Harmer said in a statement that he would “look forward to working with the SANCA board during the transition process” and Parks and Recreation Director Carolyn Brown addressed a commitment to expanding the park's role as a sports tourism destination, neither official directly addressed Blacketter's resignation on Thursday.

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