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Smooth waters at SANCA



By Pam Eudanks



By: **Pam Eudanks** | Senior Editor

Although two key executives have resigned in the past month, Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates' board chairman said operations continue to run smoothly.

Chairman Bill Robinson said despite any perception SANCA might be changing direction, there are no problems at the park and morale among the staff is good.

SANCA is a nonprofit business created to manage Nathan Benderson Park, which became a world-class, multiuse sports venue under the leadership of Paul Blacketter, who resigned as president and CEO on April 28. A month earlier, Chief Operating Officer Nicole Rissler announced her resignation to become

Sarasota County's deputy director of operations for Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources.

Robinson said both Blackketter and Rissler are leaving for better opportunities. He said SANCA's vision remains the same as it moves toward hosting the 2017 World Rowing Championship.

"It's not a morale issue, it's quite the opposite," Robinson said. "We have a talented staff we will be able to grow from within. We can energize that group."

SANCA has a mission statement of "improving the quality of life for our community and being an economic generator for our region." It strives to develop and promote Nathan Benderson Park as a world-class event center, a team training site and park.

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Blackketter will continue to strive toward those goals full time through September as he has agreed to help SANCA through the transition. After that time, he will pursue a career in consulting.

"I've been with SANCA for four years and Paul has been one of the hardest-working, driven people I've ever been around," Robinson said. "He works 24/7. He's at every event. He participates fully. He's very visible and he's out there cheering everybody on. He's going to be hard to replace."

Randy Benderson, president of Benderson Development (Blackketter's prior employer) and a board member for the Nathan Benderson Park Foundation, which raises money for facilities at the park, commended Blackketter's vision, dedication and work ethic.

"Paul Blackketter has given our community a lasting jewel," he said. "I could not be more proud of Paul's accomplishments. I don't think our community would be host to Olympic caliber events, NCAA Championships or Ivy League schools without Paul's efforts. We will certainly miss Paul and wish him the very best."

Robinson said SANCA already has contacted Prodigy Sports, the company that brought SANCA Meredith Scerba, its 2017 World Rowing Championships event director. Prodigy Sports will do a nationwide search for Blackketter's replacement and Robinson said he expects to have some candidates lined up by the end of this week.

"My goal is to make sure we find the right person," Robinson said. "Certainly, we have a time limit, albeit a long time limit. But we're on it."

Blackketter and Rissler said SANCA's staff is well equipped to move forward without them.

"Although the people may be changing, the foundation is set for big success," Rissler said.

Blackketter added, "We are a family here. I love our family. If I knew it would affect us in a negative way, I wouldn't be going. I can only go if the staff and the mission are intact. The park has a huge support system.

What's underneath is a 1,000-person network. Replacing the CEO is the tip of the iceberg.”

He said his role at SANCA has become one more of a traditional president and CEO and he's eager to return to what he loves, creating a roadmap to execute a vision. When the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic trials were held at the park in April, U.S. Olympic Committee Marketing Officer Lisa Baird told him the park was part of the Olympic family.

“That was a sense of arrival,” Blacketter said. “If there's a time and a place for me to make a move, this is the time.”

Rissler's duties already have been handed off to other staff members, and SANCA does not plan to hire a replacement. During Rissler's 11 months with SANCA, Robinson said she created so many efficiencies, that there's no longer a need for her position. Instead, SANCA will use her salary dollars toward funding other positions.

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