

SPERRY — Sean Kouplen, Oklahoma Secretary of Commerce and Workforce Development, did some crowing about the state Wednesday. Reportable gross domestic product in Oklahoma over the past two quarters has grown 3.9% and 5.5%, respectively, placing it second in the United States in economic growth, he said. Kouplen, keynote speaker at the Oklahoma Lake Development Summit at the Village at CrossTimbers at Skiatook Lake, added, “we do want to create an environment where business is welcome — That hasn’t necessarily been the case on Oklahoma lakes, many in attendance said Wednesday. About 200 state legislators, stakeholders and local and regional government officials attended the summit, which included a handful of panels that explored how state could better capitalize on public-private partnerships on Oklahoma lakes. “Quite frankly, a lot of our lakes haven’t been invested in like other states,” state Sen.

James Leewright said in a phone interview before the summit. Two years ago, Leewright was behind Senate Bill 430, which provided structure for Oklahoma public-private projects relating to infrastructure. One of the panelists Wednesday, Leewright said that before the passage of the law, “better investors would pass over Oklahoma because there was just too much uncertainty.” The need today, he said, is to attract more investment on lakes, more than 20 of which are managed by the Tulsa District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

More than 9.3 million people annually visit Oklahoma’s 60,000 acres of state parks, said Gino DeMarco, deputy director of Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation. But park facilities have been deteriorating for decades, he said. “We are looking for public-private partnerships,” he said. “We’re not necessarily interested in making a whole lot of money off these partnerships.

What we’re interested in doing is making it a better experience for the visitor.

If we have a nice marina, if we have nice equestrian resources there, a

barn or a place for you to store your horses ... what we have

are happier guests.” Ron Howell and Dustin Huff have worked with the corps on

two projects, CrossTimbers on Skiatook Lake and later Keystone Harbor at Keystone Lake. CrossTimbers

opened in May 2005 and is a public-private partnership among StateSource LLC, headed by

Howell, the Skiatook Economic Development Authority and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. StateSource received corps approval for CrossTimbers with the help of the development authority. The corps leased more than 700 acres to the authority for free, and the authority subleased the land to StateSource, also at no charge. From 2005 to 2017, CrossTimbers projects generated an estimated \$3.178 million in property taxes, data from the Osage County Assessor's Office showed. In 2016, StateSource sold CrossTimbers Marina, along with other properties, but it has jumpstarted other developments on the acreage, including the Springs Events Center, where Wednesday's summit was held. Newly proposed projects for CrossTimbers are a 7,000- to 8,000-square-foot lodge, which would include a restaurant, two smaller lodges and 35-40 cottages and new campsites.

Huff said Wednesday the Keystone Harbor lease was completed in six months, and that, at times, federal processes have gone smoothly. But the working relationship with the corps could be better, he said. "Our biggest barrier right now would have to be communication," Huff said. "At the end of the day, we're here to talk about public-private partnerships, which are critical. The public demands access to good quality facilities at these lakes. We've reach the point ... whereby when key officials come in from D.C., the corps loves to show off these projects, which they should ... But we are not invited any longer to some of those discussions, which to me is disappointing." "When we talk about public-private partnerships, the meetings that we're having now are public-public." Featured video Rhett Morgan 918-581-8395 rhett.morgan@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @RhettMorgan

Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy. The business news you need Get the latest local business news delivered FREE to your inbox weekly. Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.