

Travelers finally get a break

Heather Rule
hrule@postbulletin.com

"Hallelujah! It's good to be back."

That was Lloyd Hebig's reaction Friday morning regarding getting back to work as a custodian at the High Forest rest area along Interstate 90 in Mower County.

The rest area opened at 7 a.m. for the first time since the 20-day state government shutdown started. Rest areas across the state sat vacant during the shutdown, forcing travelers to find other places to stop.

But with the state back to work, all of the rest areas are once again open.

"Everybody's so appreciative," Hebig said. "They're glad to see us open."

It didn't take long for folks to start stopping by High Forest, only about 10 or 15 minutes after it officially opened Friday morning, Hebig said. And other than the grass needing a good trim, the area "looked like we hadn't closed down at all," he said.

Hebig, who's worked at the rest area for five years, spent his day alternating between mowing the grass and checking on the inside facilities.

A few travelers stopped by the rest area just before the noon hour. One couple from La Valle, Wis., on their return trip from their home in Wyoming, stopped to eat their lunch at a picnic table.

Richard and Joy Buri weren't aware of the shutdown when they headed west on I-90 on July 6. They noticed something was up when a certain rest area near Rochester where they usually stop was closed. They made their way across Minnesota without any open rest areas.

"We just had to go to the gas stations instead. I'm sure they were happy," Joy Buri said. "The first one (rest area) in South Dakota was jam-packed."

They said gas stations were more crowded than they might have usually been, especially with a cluster of semi-trucks trying to get into the gas station parking lots as well.

The couple agreed that having no available rest areas was "inconvenient," but they left for the trip home Thursday and were glad to see all of the rest areas were open again.

"It's always inconvenient when you count on something," Richard Buri said.

He also called the government shutdown "unbelievable" and an "annoying situation." Hebig had a similar take on things, pointing to the millions of dollars the state lost by not being able to come to an agreement on the budget.

From Hebig's point of view, come the next election time, incumbents can look for a job, he said.

"It's something that should never have happened in the first place," Hebig said. "There's no doggone excuse for this. It's a no-win situation for everybody."

At any rate, Hebig is just glad to be working again. Being outside tending to the grass, keeping the windows clean and doing something that he knows people appreciate.

"Gives you a good feeling," Hebig said.