

Testimony on SB 421 – Wisconsin Parks Revitalization Act

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

October 18, 2017 - 411 North, Wisconsin State Capitol

Good morning Committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Senate Bill 421, the Wisconsin Parks Revitalization Act. If you enjoy spending time with family and friends in Wisconsin's great outdoors, chances are you are or have been a user of our State Park System. SB 421 is a bipartisan bill which will allow the DNR to spend up to \$4.5 million in authorized but unobligated Stewardship funds from fiscal year 2016-2017 to complete critical water infrastructure projects. Parks with the highest visitor frequency will be given priority for increased funding for department identified water infrastructure maintenance, remediation and replacement.

Background: The Department of Natural Resources park staff operate 77 recreational properties open to the public, including: 45 state parks; 15 state trails; 2 national scenic trails; 8 southern forests; and 7 recreation areas. Together these areas create the Wisconsin State Park System which offers unique outdoor experiences for residents and tourists visiting state parks.

The state parks offer the finest and least expensive way to be able to realize the best of Wisconsin's natural environments and associated activities. A 2013 report by UW-Madison Urban and Regional Planning and the Wisconsin DNR found that the local economic impacts of the State Park System accounted for over 8,200 jobs, \$350 million in income and over \$1 billion in total spending. In 2016, over 17 million people visited the Wisconsin State Park System, which is a 21% increase from a decade prior. In comparison to other Midwest states, Wisconsin ranks number one in outdoor recreation.

Even with the significant economic impact of the State Park System, funding is not sufficient to cover the costs of all critical maintenance and infrastructure repairs and upgrades. When it comes to critical water infrastructure projects, they shouldn't have to compete with the more highly visible, aesthetic enhancements like signs, welcome centers and concession stands.

One water contamination outbreak at a highly visible state park and the associated decrease in visitors to a "high demand" park could decrease the overall funding for the entire State Park System and create public relations problems for the Wisconsin State Parks. According to the DNR, eight state parks make up the majority of the funding for the entire system; Peninsula, Devils Lake, North and South Kettle Moraine, High Cliff, Kohler-Andre, Governor Dodge and Willow River.

The Problem: The DNR has identified several critical water infrastructure projects in the past couple of years. Some have been included in the DNR Capitol Budget requests, but other significant projects will wait to fight for funding priority in the 2019-2021 budget process. The projects identified by the department include, but are not limited to:

- Water line replacement;
- Drinking water fixtures replacement;
- Septic system replacement;
- Vault toilet replacement, and;
- Waste storage areas.

Each replacement is necessary to safeguard the quality of drinking water and ensure swimmable waters. The DNR indicates that several of the water infrastructure items mentioned above are near the end or past their useful lives and repair is no longer an option. The systems are inadequate to handle the amount of users or are failing, leaking or about to fail. The way in which we handle human waste in state parks can have a direct impact on ground and surface water quality. If waste is leaching into soils from old vault toilet systems and failing septic systems then those contaminants can find their way to ground and surface waters potentially closing beaches and contaminating drinking water.

The Solution: Current law allows the DNR to incur debt under the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 Program to purchase land for preservation and public access. After ending the practice to carry over unused Stewardship bonding at the end of fiscal year 2010-2011, the Legislature must now approve any use of these authorized but unobligated funds.

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau has confirmed that the remaining 2016-2017 unobligated Stewardship funds, after subtracting the amount enumerated for projects in 2017 Act 59, is \$7.8 million. Using unobligated Stewardship bonding for non-land acquisition purposes is not a new concept. As far back as the 1991-93 budget and as recent as the 2017-2019 biennial budget, remaining authorized but unobligated Stewardship funds were approved for nearly 30 large infrastructure projects. Those approved in the last two budgets include:

- Canadian Pacific Railway Corridor Trail;
- Dam Safety Grants;
- Horicon Marsh Overlook Shelter Enhancement;
- Kettle Moraine Spring Fish Hatchery;
- Municipal Flood Control Grants;
- Neenah Menasha Twin Trestles;
- Repair or Replacement of the Little; Falls Dam at Willow River, and;
- Saxon Harbor Campground & Marina.

The critical water infrastructure upgrades that the department will be able to complete with the funding provided in Senate Bill 421 will improve the overall park experience providing new systems that can handle the visitor frequency. The replacements will also protect the health of millions of Wisconsin's State Park System visitors. Without improvements, deteriorating water infrastructure in our parks could have a negative long-term impact on our tourism industry.

State of Wisconsin
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
101 S. Webster Street
Box 7921
Madison WI 53707-7921

Scott Walker, Governor
Daniel L. Meyer, Secretary
Telephone 608-266-2621
Toll Free 1-888-936-7463
TTY Access via relay - 711



Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

2017 Senate Bill 421

Water Infrastructure Projects in State Parks

October 18, 2017

Good morning Chairman Cowles and Committee members. My name is Ben Bergey, and I am the Department of Natural Resources' Parks and Recreation Bureau Director. Thank you for the opportunity to testify for informational purposes on Senate Bill 421.

The Wisconsin State Park System sees more than 17 million visitors across more than 100 properties statewide. These visitors engage in a variety of recreational opportunities from camping and hiking to boating and picnicking. Property facilities and infrastructure provide the foundation of elements required to serve the needs and ensure the safety of our visitors.

The Department has identified approximately \$6.2 million in water (drinking and waste water) infrastructure projects that would be eligible for funding under the provisions of Senate Bill 421. Under the bill, the agency would be authorized to utilize unobligated bonding authority to address these previously identified property infrastructure needs.

The identified projects include \$1.2 million for drinking water infrastructure replacement at Devil's Lake, \$1.0 million in vault toilet replacement at Peninsula and \$1.0 million in drinking fountain replacement at various properties throughout the system, including highly visited properties such as Willow River, High Cliff, Governor Dodge, Peninsula and Devil's Lake, as well as other projects to address aging waste water infrastructure throughout the state park system.

I hope you find this information helpful, and would be happy to address any questions you may have.

Legislative Hearing

October 18, 2017

Bill Zager, Amery, WI Pres. Friends of Wisconsin State Parks.

I as President of Friends of Wisconsin State Parks (FWSP) I represent over 80 Local Friends Groups (Friends) that work with State Parks, Trails, Forests and Recreation Areas to preserve, promote, protect and enhance the State Park System. We are all very proud of the Wisconsin State Park System.

The Friends and FWSP work very hard to bring out the best of the Parks and Trails to enhance the park visitors experience. We do this by cleaning up the property, promoting activities and educational programming opportunities. All of these efforts enhance the visitors experience, but this cannot outweigh the experience they have if the restrooms and water supply are in disrepair. The water and sewer systems in many of these parks are original and badly in need of repair and updating. Many of these systems are over 60 years old and some water systems were installed by WPA time period. Most of these properties are by some of our most sensitive areas of rivers, lakes, or wetlands. To protect these sensitive area as founding fathers such as Aldo Leopold would like, we must at a minimum meet our own WDNR water and sewer code compliance and health and safety quality standards.

I have been to 3 Friend of State Parks National Gatherings and have discovered that the Wisconsin State Parks System is the envy of the nation. The reputation of Wisconsin State Parks is to be a clean, safe place to vacation, with good scenery and an opportunity to learn and participate in programming. Infrastructure needs to be in good repair, especially the water and sewer systems which have much more stress with today's lifestyle and vacation expectations. Not only are many of our State Park water and sewers are outdated, but are not designed to carry RV's and demands on the system due to record State Parks usership.

The bill we have before us of \$4.5 million would be a large step towards replacing Water and Sewer infrastructure at some our most heavily used Parks, such as Peninsula, Devil's Lake, Big Bay, Interstate and Pattison and alleviate the need for costly bandaid temporary repairs. Safe drinking water and good restroom facilities are essential to keep our State Park Visitors to have a positive experience. This bill will also provide funding to provide safe drinking water and meet ADA compliance at Mirror Lake, Kohler Andre, Willow River, High Cliff, Blue Mound, Governor Dodge, Perrot and Merrick State Parks. This bill it would eliminate many costly emergency repairs all around the state and help keep all State residents proud of our great State Park System, by the way they are really the owners of these Gems of the State!

Thank You!



RON TUSLER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 3rd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

**Testimony Before the
Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Energy
on
Senate Bill 421
October 18, 2017**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for hearing Senate Bill 421—the Parks Revitalization Act. This bill addresses critical health and safety infrastructure needs at our most popular state parks.

In the 2015-17 State Budget we authorized use of these Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program funds for maintenance, but they were not used last biennium. Meanwhile, we have raised camping, vehicle, and other Wisconsin State Parks System fees and cut GPR funding in the last two State Budgets while critical health and safety needs have gone unaddressed at parks across the state.

Over 17 million people visited the Wisconsin State Park System in 2016, a 21 percent increase from a decade prior.¹ With such an increase in the number of visitors, degrading safety and water quality conditions in the parks cannot continue. In a study conducted for the Wisconsin Department of Tourism², our state parks are a strong selling point for tourists. Wisconsin received its highest “image” ratings for our “outdoor assets (i.e. scenery, *clear water for recreation*, other outdoor recreation activities)” and “*excellent state parks*.”

The Parks Revitalization Act funds will be used to fund critical projects such as vault toilet replacements, water treatment system repairs, sewer line replacements and water line replacements. The bill also prioritizes the highest-demand state parks. Top-six most-visited parks are Devil's Lake State Park, Governor Dodge State Park, High Cliff State Park, Kohler-Andrae State Park, Peninsula State Park and Willow River State Park.

I urge you to support the Parks Revitalization Act and see to it that our state parks do not fall into disrepair. This is an excellent investments that will create a healthier and safer environment for patrons and keep our state parks system one of the best in the nation. Thank you.

¹ WSP attendance data available at: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/documents/WSPSattendance.pdf>

² 2016 Advertising Evaluation, Image and Return On Investment Study, Wisconsin Department of Tourism (slides on file with Rep. Tusler).