



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2021 Assembly Bill 285 Veteran Boat Launch Permits September 2, 2021

Good morning Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Linda Olver, Customer and Outreach Services' Policy Advisor for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Assembly Bill 285 (AB 285), related to boat launch permits for resident veterans 65 and older.

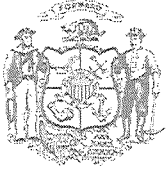
State statute allows a municipality, a public inland lake protection and rehabilitation district or a town sanitary district to charge a public boat launch fee under certain conditions. Currently, the department does not issue boat launch permits.

The provisions of AB 285 create a program where resident veterans 65 and older who provide a copy of their operator's license and certificate of release (commonly known as Form DD-214) may obtain a free boat launch permit that authorizes access to any public boat launch owned or operated by a municipality, public inland lake protection and rehabilitation district, or town sanitary district. Under AB 285, the boat launch permit is required to be affixed to the inside lower left corner of the windshield of the vehicle the person uses to trailer a boat.

AB 285 specifies veterans may apply in person or via mail to the department or to the veterans' county of residence. If a county accepts an application, they are required to issue a permit and forward the application to the department. This bill prohibits the department or the county from charging a fee for the boat launch permit.

Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 proposes an alternative method for implementing the veteran boat launch fee exemption program. Under the provisions of ASA 1, no physical pass must be issued to veteran applicants by the department or counties. ASA 1 requires veterans age 65 and older provide a copy of the registration for the vehicle he or she is using to trailer the boat and a copy of his or her DD-214. The documentation may be presented to the boat launch attendant or deposited into a receptacle provided for collecting payments at the boat launch. ASA 1 greatly simplifies program administration and eliminates department and county costs. However, please note the required documentation contains sensitive personal information such as social security numbers that veterans may be hesitant to deposit in an unattended boat landing drop box.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



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*Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
State Senator André Jacque
September 2, 2021*

Chairman Mursau and Colleagues,

Thank you for holding today's hearing on Assembly Bill 285, relating to veteran boat launch permits. I am pleased to join Rep. Thiesfeldt in this effort.

Veterans in our state have done much in serving our country, many even sacrificing their very lives for our freedom. Upon retirement, many retired veterans find themselves surviving on social security, living month to month, crippled with large medical bills, having little in the way of recreation, and can't even place their fishing boat in the water due to mandated fees.

This bill will allow veterans who are over 65 years of age free access to boat launch facilities throughout the state. This will save these retired veterans money, as many of them are on strict budgets. In addition, being able to be on the water is very therapeutic to many veterans.

This will especially help those veterans who find it hard to get to a state park. Some veterans need to drive 80-100 miles just to get access to a free boat launch. Veterans now have to spend \$6-8 each time they want to put a boat, canoe, or kayak in the water. For some veterans who use the water therapeutically, this can add up over a summer.

This bill only applies to boat launching fees. It does not apply to docking or marina fees.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 285.



Waukesha County

September 2, 2021

To: Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
From: Alex Ignatowski, Legislative Policy Advisor, Waukesha County
Re: Assembly Bill 285

The County is supportive of this bill and share in Rep. Thiesfeldt's vision to provide free access to Wisconsin lakes for those who have sacrificed so much for this country. In fact, Waukesha County Boat Launches are free to use for veterans on Memorial Day, Veterans Day and the 4th of July. We also offer a discounted rate for a Parks sticker to POW's and disabled veterans. Assembly Bill 285 would extend free access to boat launches to all veterans over the age of 65.

After reviewing the legislation, we found that the process spelled out for the verification of someone's veteran status does not conform with the way that Waukesha County administers its boat access stickers. Waukesha County sells park passes and boat access stickers online. This has streamlined our business operations and reduced the cost of staffing. The process in this bill would reduce the efficiencies that we have worked hard to create at the county.

We would support an amendment to the bill that would allow for the local unit of government to develop its own process for verification of someone's veteran status. In Waukesha County, we would likely allow for veterans to self-attest to their status on our website and we would then mail them a sticker. If this bill becomes law in its current form, we will have to periodically send staff to collect this paperwork from our boat launches. This is an unnecessary and inefficient use of staff time. The bottom line for us is that if we are able have veterans self-attest on our website, we can streamline the process and make it easier for them to get on the water without paying a fee.

Waukesha County supports an amendment to the bill that would allow local units of government to set up their own verification process to best fit that government's current business operations.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding Waukesha County's position on this legislation.

Alex Ignatowski
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Testimony Before the Assembly Committee

Doug Stoll

August 31, 2021

I am writing this letter to support AB 285. I am the commander of American Legion Post #395 in Kingston, WI. Many of the members of my post are over the age of 65 and are on a fixed income. The ability for them to be able to engage in the activity of fishing on Wisconsin lakes without having to pay a launch fee would be greatly beneficial to them. These veterans have given so much to us citizens of Wisconsin and in my opinion this is the least we can do for them.

Thank You,

Doug Stoll

Testimony Before the Assembly Committee
Thoms F. Medick
August 31, 2021

I am in favor of this Bill. I do a lot of fishing and enjoy being out in the boat but I am not able to as it has become too expensive to pay for all these boat landing fees. As most Veteran I live on Social Security and I cannot afford to pay the fee whenever I want to launch my boat.

Tom Medick – American Legion Post 395 Kingston, WI

Testimony Before The Assembly Committee
James Medick
August 31, 2021

Reference

Assembly Bill 285, Access to Boat Launches For Retired Veterans

Introduction

Chairman and members of the Assembly Committee, thank you for holding this hearing and the opportunity to testify on behalf of Assembly Bill 285.

Bill Summary

This bill enables retired Wisconsin veterans to avoid paying a fee for launching a boat in Wisconsin waterways. It is supported by the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Why This Bill Is Important

Many Wisconsin retired veterans live on limited means and find themselves economically challenged meeting simple day-to-day expenses. Increased medical costs due to age and sometimes their military service compound this problem. Consequently, their access to social interaction and entertainment is limited. They simply cannot afford the additional costs and many have decreased mobility.

One of the few things they can enjoy is fishing one of Wisconsin's lakes or rivers. However, due to current requirements, they must pay a daily use fee between \$6 and \$8 to simply put their rowboat or canoe in the water. This policy effectively restricts this opportunity or negates it altogether. For some, it is the only pastime they may have.

Additional Costs Required

There are no additional costs to implement or maintain this program.

Need for Veteran Disability

There are those who require veterans to have a specific level of disability before they can be given consideration for some exemptions. This may be justified in some cases, but where in the Wisconsin statutes or minds and hearts of Wisconsin residents is there a requirement that a veteran must have lost all, or part of, or control of a major body part before they're allowed to place a rowboat in Wisconsin waters?

Conclusion

It is often difficult to know what the "right thing to do" is. But in this instance, I believe the reasons for passing this bill are evident: give back to those people who gave to us. It is the right thing to do. When we can do this and do it efficiently without incurring additional costs, we are truly fortunate.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

James Medick

