



# TODD NOVAK

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DATE: Thursday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

RE: Testimony on Assembly Bill 391

TO: The Assembly Committee on Tourism

FROM: State Representative Todd Novak

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Thank you, Chairman Tranel, and members of the Assembly Committee on Tourism for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 391 (AB391), which directs the Governor to use funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to re-open all of Wisconsin's historic sites.

During the height of the pandemic the Wisconsin Historical Society transferred staff to help the Department of Workforce Development (DWD), Department of Health Services (DHS), and other state agencies respond to the public health emergency. Currently, the Wisconsin Historical Society faces a budget shortfall of about \$2.4 million due to the loss of program revenue in 2020 because of pandemic related shutdowns. As a result of the current funding challenges, the majority of Wisconsin's historical tourism sites will not open until 2022. Below is a list of all the closed sites from around the state:

- First Capitol – 185<sup>th</sup> Anniversary - Belmont
- H.H. Bennett Studio & Museum - Wisconsin Dells
- Pendarvis – Mineral Point
- Reed School – Neillsville
- Stonefield – Cassville
- Villa Louis – Prairie du Chien
- Wade House – Greenbush

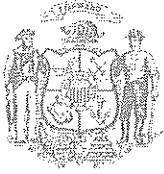
Of the sites listed above, the First Capitol in Belmont and Pendarvis in Mineral Point are both in my legislative district. The First Capitol is celebrating its 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. In 1836 between October 25<sup>th</sup> and December 9<sup>th</sup> the first territorial legislature gathered in Belmont and approved 42 Acts. Wisconsinites should have the ability to learn more about the first territorial government and celebrate the occasion of the 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Pendarvis, a collection of 19<sup>th</sup> Century structures later preserved by Bob Neal and Edgar Hellum in Mineral Point also remains closed. Once again, Wisconsinites should be able to explore and reflect on what daily life may have been like 180 years ago.

Beyond the appreciation for the historical significance of these sites, reopening is crucial for the local economies of Belmont, Wisconsin Dells, Mineral Point, Neillsville, Cassville, Prairie du Chien, and Greenbush as their local tourism industries recover from the pandemic. Wisconsin

school children have also missed out on learning about the state's history through in-person visits and field trips due to the site closures.

Unfortunately, efforts to work through Wisconsin Council on Tourism to persuade the Governor to fully reopen the sites have not been successful to date. This legislative proposal would instead direct the Governor to use available federal funds through ARPA to reopen all the temporarily closed sites.

Thank you for your consideration of AB391.



**ANDRÉ JACQUE**

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*Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Tourism*

*State Senator André Jacque*

*June 10, 2021*

Chairman Tranel and Committee Members,

Thank you for holding this hearing on Assembly Bill 391, which will ensure the re-opening to the public of presently shuttered Wisconsin Historical Society sites.

The Wisconsin Historical Society played an important role in helping our state navigate the COVID-19 pandemic by transferring a significant number of staff to help state agencies to assist with staffing issues. Currently, the Wisconsin Historical Society faces a budget shortfall of about \$2.4 million due to the loss of program revenue in 2020 because of pandemic related shutdowns. Due to the current funding challenges, the majority of Wisconsin's historical tourism sites will not open until 2022. AB 391 directs federal COVID-19 relief funds be used to open all of the closed Wisconsin Historical Society sites for the 2021 season.

While the presently closed sites are located outside of the 1<sup>st</sup> Senate District, I am happy to help bring this legislation forward as a strong advocate for Wisconsin history and Wisconsin's tourism industry, which clearly recognizes the value of these sites in driving additional travel and visitor spending and preserving our heritage. The members of the Wisconsin Council on Tourism, including Acting Secretary Sayers, unanimously voted on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021 to send a letter to Gov. Evers requesting the use of these federal funds for this purpose, but it was subsequently determined by the DOA that it did not properly post the meeting, and thus no official actions were taken at the meeting.

Opening these historical tourism sites is crucial not just for the local economies of Belmont, Wisconsin Dells, Mineral Point, Neillsville, Cassville, Prairie du Chien, and Greenbush as they try to bounce back from the negative impacts of the pandemic and closures, but for our state as a whole, and AB 391 will make reopening of all of our state's historical tourism sites this year a top priority. Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 391.