

January 2, 2007

The Honorable Senator Roger M. Breske
Room 310 South
State Capitol
P.O. Box 7882
Madison 53707-7882

Dear Senator Breske:

I am writing you in your role as the Chairman of the Special Committee on State Trails Policy and I ask that this letter become part of the public record of your Committee meeting set for this Thursday, January 4. Fond du Lac County has been a state trail partner since 1987 with the acquisition and development of the Wild Goose State Park Trail, the first partner trail in Wisconsin. I believe this experience as well as experience with two subsequent partner trails has provided me with a somewhat unique perspective on state park trails and trail uses. As a state park trail partner, I urge the Special Committee to leave undisturbed the existing and future working relationships between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and local governments that become state park trail partners. Trail partners seek public involvement during the land acquisition phase, set trail uses, and develop trails accordingly for state park trails across Wisconsin. Trail partners like Fond du Lac County do the day-to-day maintenance and provide law enforcement services on these trails.

The trail partner relationships we have in Wisconsin encourages local buy-in to the outdoor recreation opportunities provided by our State's network of state park trails. These trail partner relationships allow the Department to focus on the big picture of creating a recreation trail network that links large areas of our state. Local partners such as Fond du Lac County then undertake the tasks of encouraging public participation in the acquisition and development process as well as setting permitted trail uses. In Fond du Lac County we have heard over and over from our trail neighbors that these linear parks are a desired amenity, providing places away from traffic to ride a bike, go for a walk or a run. Most of our trail neighbors have been accepting of snowmobiling as a winter use. With many folks spending a large part of their time indoors with windows closed; along with the muffling effect of snow, noise generated from snowmobiles has not been an issue for most of our trail neighbors.

Recently, our County Board dealt with two requests by ATV groups to open our state park trails to ATV use. Local ATV groups made their case and requested inclusion as a permitted year-round use on our state park trails. More than 170 persons were in attendance at the local meeting, the largest attendance for any issue ever addressed by

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Fond du Lac County government. At the committee level, the vote was unanimous against permitting ATVs as a permitted year-round use. A second ATV group requested ATV riding as a permitted winter use. Although our Parks and Development Committee supported the winter use proposal, the proposal was voted down by a vote of 9 to 26 by our full County Board. User conflicts, safety, and the potential for trail surface damage were the predominant reasons mentioned for voting down the winter use proposal.

My primary point in all of this information is that we have a good system in place for partnering on state park trails in Wisconsin. We have mechanisms for garnering support for these important outdoor recreation facilities. Finally, we have mechanisms in place to hear from both neighboring landowners and from potential trail user groups as we determine how trails are developed and used. Please, allow us to continue and build on the success we've all shared in for the development of Wisconsin's state park trail network. I have been told that your committee intends to leave this relationship undisturbed. If this is correct, I want to be the first to thank you for your wisdom on this issue.

Finally, I would like to end with a couple of comments on the proposal to increase fees for ATV registration and for a change in the gas tax formula that is used to build the ATV trail development fund. The Wisconsin ATV grant program is presently under-subscribed; there is more money in the fund than there are trails to spend these funds on in Wisconsin. Taking more money from the gas tax and taking more money from the pockets of ATV riders with no plan in place for spending these additional dollars might only exacerbate the problem that ATV riders now have, which is having few riding opportunities in relation to the dollars collected from ATV riders. It may be a cart before the horse issue, but before taking more dollars out of the pockets of ATV riders, Wisconsin in my estimation should develop a plan for the acquisition and development of a few major off-road vehicle riding parks. My knowledge of ATV issues is limited, but it is my understanding that there are somewhere between 6,000 and 9,000 miles of ATV trails in Wisconsin, mostly in the north half of the state. The south half of the state has limited riding opportunities despite most ATV registrations are from the south half of the state. A few well-located major off-road riding parks between La Crosse and Milwaukee might satisfy the largest number of ATV riders. A state plan to this end could provide the focus needed to get a few good ATV riding parks established. No such plan coupled with increased registration fees and a larger share of the gas tax designated for ATV trails will only weaken the relationship between ATV riders and state/local governments that typically provide outdoor recreation opportunities by way of parks and trails.

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Thank you for your time and the opportunity to be heard. I wish you and the Special Committee the best of luck as you move forward on this difficult issue. ATV riders need ATV specific facilities to enjoy their form of outdoor recreation. It is my hope that state and local government can partner with ATV interests to provide the types of riding facilities that ATV riders need and deserve. I would be pleased to serve toward this end if the opportunity arises through some sort of special committee for the establishment of a few off-road riding parks.

Sincerely,

Sam Tobias
Planning & Parks Director