STATE AFFAIRS
WISPOLITICS
Wisconsin's Premier Political News Service

Rep. Mursau: Working to protect the sustainability of Wisconsin's forest industry

Posted on Friday, May 19, 2017

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. Get the app or access via desktop.

There is a great deal of discussion circulating around the Forestry Mill Tax, which recently has been nicknamed, "the Statewide Property Tax". Governor Walker has proposed eliminating this tax and instead shifts funding from GPR (income and sales tax revenues) to support forestry efforts. I've been vocal in my opposition to the Governor's proposal because forestry is one of the top five employers in my district (first or second in 3 counties). I'm not willing to gamble away a secure funding source and put the people I represent at risk.

After the budget was introduced, I sent a survey to my district asking for input on budget priorities. I also asked if they support keeping the Forestry Mill Tax or the Governor's provision to remove it from the property tax bill. Over 80% of respondents are in favor of keeping the Forestry Mill Tax. They understand how the funding source equates to having healthy and sustainable forests and job security for their families.

I have supported every budget the Governor has introduced and he's always been a strong supporter of our forestry industry. On this particular issue however, I disagree with him and I'm not alone. The Governor's Council of Forestry, which advises him on forestry issues, voted today to oppose the Governor's proposal.

I believe we can reduce property taxes and support forestry at the same time. I've proposed, and the Governor's Council of Forestry supports, an audit of the Forestry Account by the independent Audit Bureau. Let's make sure the funds are being used appropriately before we make hasty decisions we can't take back. If the audit shows we're collecting more than we need or the funds are being mismanaged, we

can adjust the mill tax accordingly and save property taxpayers some money.

The forest product industry employs more than 64,000 people and is the number one employer in several Wisconsin counties. Our printing industry employs an additional 29,000 workers and Wisconsin is the number one paper-producer in the United States. Our forestry industry has an output of $24.7 billion. If we don't ensure that we have a healthy and sustainable crop, we put all of this in jeopardy.

If we fund forestry efforts with GPR than forestry will be forced to compete in future budgets with transportation, education, and health care for adequate funding. I am certain that forestry will always lose because it isn't a statewide priority. This means our forests suffer, my constituents will be out of work, and we'll no longer be the envy of other states that currently can't compete with our timber quality and production.

Lastly, we get quite a lot for our annual $27 investment. This includes supporting our local volunteer fire departments when wildfires occur and just last week the Governor declared a State of Emergency in response to elevated wildfire conditions in the state. We don't want to experience what the state of Kansas did this year when almost 700,000 acres were destroyed by fires. Similar to rural Wisconsin, most of the fire departments in Kansas are volunteer and they weren't equipped to handle that type of fire and the state didn't have additional resources in place to help the local towns. They lost so many trees and families lost their homes.

I believe an audit of the forestry account is a reasonable compromise. We keep our industry intact, establish integrity of the forestry account, and offer tax relief to property owners.