

Tony Wilkin Gibart: Change of leadership has done little to bring transparency to Natural Resources Board

Posted on Friday, Jun 10, 2022

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

Last month, Greg Kazmierski, chair of the Natural Resources Board (NRB), gave his first address to the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, an elected body of citizen volunteers that advises the NRB on environmental policy in Wisconsin.

Given the controversy surrounding the continued refusal of NRB member Fred Prehn to step down after the expiration of his term, one might have expected Kazmierski to shore up trust in the board. Instead, he reinforced the perception that some board members no longer consider themselves accountable to the people.

“Don’t be hesitant to pick up the phone and give us a call,” Kazmierski said to the assembled delegates.

>> 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.](#)

Okay, that is good. The chair of the NRB wants to hear from Congress delegates. What came next is the problem.

“Matter of fact,” he continued, “I prefer to communicate that way. In this litigious era that we’re in right now, with open records and all that kind of stuff, I’d rather just...talk one on one with you.”

Even by the standards of today’s politics and the erosion of democratic norms, this

is troubling. Why doesn't Kazmierski want the public to know what policies are being discussed by NRB members and Conservation Congress delegates? These officials are supposed to represent our interests.

It is also a troubling statement given the history and legacy of the NRB and the Conservation Congress. These bodies have roots stretching back nearly a century. They were created because Aldo Leopold and his contemporaries sought to ensure environmental policy would not be decided in backroom dealings between politicians and powerful special interests. For many years, these bodies served as mechanisms for direct democracy by putting conservation policymaking in the hands of citizen volunteers.

But while the NRB and the Conservation Congress were once models of openness in government, they have increasingly come under the influence of officials who disregard public accountability.

More than a year after his term expired, Prehn remains on the NRB. He argues he can stay in power because the state senate has refused to vote on Governor Evers' nominee to replace him. Prehn's refusal to step down has allowed him to cast the deciding vote in key decisions related to statewide environmental policy, including the decision to weaken safe drinking water standards. He also cast the deciding vote to make Kazmierski the new chair.

In bemoaning enforcement of "open records and all that kind of stuff" Kazmierski was likely alluding to efforts by my organization, Midwest Environmental Advocates, to uncover facts about Prehn's decision to hold on to power. Through the public records law, we learned that Prehn consulted with lobbyists for polluters who oppose safe drinking water standards, that these same lobbyists met with senate leadership about Prehn, and that Prehn himself sought counsel from the legislature.

Despite everything we uncovered, it was clear Prehn hadn't turned over all the records, so we filed a lawsuit to get them. That litigation has already led to the discovery of a text message in which former Governor Walker advised Prehn to stay on the NRB to keep Walker's appointees in control of statewide environmental policy. This means the candidate for Governor who lost the last election is using the NRB to defy the will of Wisconsin voters.

With Prehn, Walker, lobbyists for polluters and Kazmierski all scheming to shut the public out, it seems the very backroom dealings that the NRB was designed to limit

now control the NRB, and that's not likely to change so long as Prehn remains on the NRB.

— *Tony Wilkin Gibart is the executive director of [Midwest Environmental Advocates](#), a nonprofit environmental law firm that works to defend public rights, protect natural resources, and ensure transparency and accountability in government.*