

Rep. Joers: Restoring transparency for conservation

Posted on Wednesday, Feb 15, 2023

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Many know the incredible conservation that has been done in Wisconsin thanks to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program. Created in 1989, this fund preserves wildlife habitats, natural areas, and waterways throughout our state's 72 counties. Historically, projects funded by this program are bipartisan, going along with the namesake of two conservation-minded former governors of Wisconsin, Warren Knowles (Republican) and Gaylord Nelson (Democrat). Through this fund, Wisconsin has protected 600,000 acres of land from Bayfield to Beloit and everywhere in between.

Recently, Governor Evers released his recommendations for conservation in his 2023-25 Biennial Budget. This includes many positive initiatives such as; \$4.4 million for the growth of our forests statewide, \$5 million for clean energy job training and reemployment, and \$2.7 for invasive species prevention. Another hopeful item that the Legislature should seriously consider is restoring transparency around the approval process for stewardship projects in our state.

Often Knowles-Nelson projects are subject to approval by the Joint Finance Committee in the Legislature. Under state statutes, all stewardship grants or projects over \$250,000, and all land acquisitions north of State Highway 64, must be submitted to the Joint Finance Committee for passive review. However, the review process by this group of legislators has a caveat that allows any one member of the Joint Finance Committee to object to a project without disclosing their name or any reason for holding up approval – more simply called an anonymous objector.

To add transparency to this process, the new provision included in Governor Evers' budget requires that if a member of the Legislature objects to a proposed

stewardship project approval, that member's name and nature of the objection be announced publicly. This is a reasonable ask and should be embraced by the Joint Finance Committee.

Anonymous objections have been weaponized many times by the Republican majority, leaving conservation projects stalled that could result in indefinite delay endangering these projects all together. In fact, just since the beginning of 2019 there have been 27 objections to stewardship projects. Only nine projects for which objections were made were later approved after weeks or months of delay, including two for which the objection was withdrawn and seven that were acted upon in hearings scheduled by the Joint Finance Committee.

It is reasonable for members to want to review and address concerns with projects that come before the Legislature. However, the objector should be public and constituents should know why that legislator needs to pause the review process. That's putting common-sense over meaningless obstruction. Let's ensure the timely and transparent approval of needed stewardship projects in Wisconsin so future generations can continue to benefit from the great natural spaces our state has to offer.