

# Sen. Hesselbein: All of the state should have a say on stewardship

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Spring has finally arrived in Wisconsin, bringing with it the opportunity to enjoy public places and state parks currently awakening to rich green colors and budding trees. Sustaining the state parks we enjoy requires funding to maintain access, facilities and trails, and Governor Evers has addressed this in his proposed budget.

Among Governor Evers' proposals to augment the park experience is a little-discussed provision to include free park admission for fourth-grade students (and their family vehicles!). I am also proud to be an author of proposed legislation allowing free park admission on Earth Day.

The Governor's capital budget also includes key plans to rehabilitate the Stewart Tunnel, a vital link for bicycling in the Belleville area. The proposal will be before the Finance Committee late in the process when they address the building program my Republican colleagues on the Building Commission rejected.

As well, the Governor's budget proposes long-needed improvements to one of Wisconsin's policy jewels: the Stewardship Program. The program is designed to acquire and protect public lands, but it is subject to the arbitrary (and often anonymous) whims of a committee representing less than 30% of our state. Equally absurd, the Joint Finance Committee, possessing only 16 of 132 legislative members, is the sole arbiter of whether and when Stewardship projects can advance, with a schedule controlled by just two members representing a combined 4.04% of Wisconsin residents.

Created and significantly expanded by former Governor Tommy Thompson, the Wisconsin Stewardship Program is designed to "acquire land to expand nature-based outdoor recreational opportunities and protect environmentally sensitive

areas.” This program is vital for hunters, anglers, hikers, paddlers, and importantly the lands, plants and wildlife in our state that need protection.

Projects with statewide benefits and impact should not be delayed by one legislator. At present, it requires only one Republican senator or one Republican assembly member on the Joint Finance Committee to halt the process. Governor Evers’ proposes changing state law to prohibit Joint Finance members delaying projects with anonymous objections, and requiring those objections to be public and justified. This change is needed because during the past year alone, two significant stewardship projects have generated statewide frustration following obstructions placed by Republican legislators playing political games. Just one objection is all it takes to freeze the process, and that is unacceptable.

Spring is here, and with it the opportunity to pass budget legislation that will sustain Wisconsin State Parks—just one of the reasons Wisconsin is a wonderful place to live and enjoy. Let’s get the budget done!