

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 12, 2026

Contact: Dave Allen, Executive Director of PATCH (dallen54913@live.com; 920-540-0095)

CONSERVATION GROUP SUES WISCONSIN DNR FOR SECRETLY BULLDOZING A DOOR COUNTY STATE PARK

Potawatomi State Park's Century-Old Tree Canopy Destroyed Without a Single Public Hearing — Lawsuit Demands DNR Halt Construction Before More Damage Is Done

STURGEON BAY, WI — The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources secretly demolished one of Door County's most beloved state parks — and now it's being sued for it. Potawatomi Advocates for Trees, Conservation and Heritage (PATCH) filed suit today in Door County Circuit Court against the Wisconsin DNR and DNR Secretary Karen Hyun, seeking a court order to stop the agency from causing further irreversible damage to Potawatomi State Park.

THE DNR CALLED IT 'ROAD RESURFACING.' IT WAS ANYTHING BUT.

Starting in January 2026, DNR contractors quietly moved into the Park and began a sweeping construction project. What the DNR described to the public as routine 'road resurfacing' turned out to be:

- Roads widened by up to 10 feet — from 18-20 feet to 28 feet — to add designated bike lanes;
- A 150-foot clear-cut swath through old-growth forest to 'straighten' South Norway Road — destroying a winding, canopied corridor that has defined the Park for nearly 100 years;
- Removal of historic tree medians and road canopy across approximately 1.75 miles of Park roads;

- Tree clearing and soil disturbance within the 200-foot protected buffer zone of the Niagara Escarpment — home to state threatened and endangered snail species; and
- Removal of natural screening trees around parking lots.

The DNR did not hold a public hearing. It did not seek approval from the Natural Resources Board. It did not conduct an environmental review. By the time the agency quietly updated its website on May 22, 2026 to acknowledge what had actually happened, the vast majority of the trees were already gone. Before and after photos and a recent photo of the ongoing construction work are below.

Before the Project



After the Project



Recent ongoing work:



'RECOVERY WILL REQUIRE FIFTY TO ONE HUNDRED YEARS'

Northern white cedar trees on the Niagara Escarpment — cleared by the DNR's Project in an area expressly protected by the Park's binding 2018 Master Plan — grow at approximately one inch every fifteen years. The damage that has been done cannot be undone in any reasonable timeframe. And the DNR is not finished. Park employees have confirmed that what has already been destroyed is only 'Phase 1.' The same road-widening and clear-cutting is planned for North Norway Road — the last untouched road corridor in the Park. Surveyors have already been spotted staking it out.

THE LAW IS CLEAR. AND THE DNR IGNORED IT

Under Wisconsin law, the DNR is legally bound by the Park's 2018 Master Plan. That plan authorizes only maintenance of existing roads 'at current development levels.' It explicitly requires that '[t]he level of development, open and closed status, and miles of roads will remain consistent' with the Park's land classification. It prohibits soil disturbance and canopy removal within the 200-foot escarpment buffer zone. And it mandates public notice, a public involvement plan, and approval from the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board before any material changes are made. The DNR bypassed every single one of those requirements.

WHAT PATCH IS ASKING THE COURT TO DO

PATCH's lawsuit asks the Court to declare that the DNR's Project violated Wisconsin law, and to permanently enjoin the DNR from any further destruction at the Park — until it complies with the public notice, environmental review, and Natural Resources Board approval requirements it was legally obligated to follow from the start. PATCH Executive Director, Dave Allen, who lives in the area and recreates in the Park put it this way: “The DNR is supposed to be a steward of our state parks, but a few rogue DNR employees are acting as if they own the Park themselves and can do whatever they want. The Park belongs to all Wisconsin citizens, and the DNR needs to consult with those citizens before undertaking permanently damaging construction in the Park.” Early next week, PATCH intends to file an emergency motion with the Court asking the court to halt construction while it considers PATCH’s case.

ABOUT PATCH

Potawatomi Advocates for Trees, Conservation and Heritage (PATCH) is a Wisconsin nonprofit corporation dedicated to the preservation and protection of trees and the natural environment in Potawatomi State Park. PATCH is represented in this matter on a pro-bono basis by Husch Blackwell LLP.