

State Land for Sale in No Bid Contracts?

Posted on May 21, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



MADISON - *"I strongly supported the bipartisan Wisconsin Stewardship Fund,"* a self-described Republican man from Eau Claire wrote to me.

"Conservation issues are near and dear to my heart. I will oppose any politician who does not listen to all Wisconsin constituents and give these issues due process."

The letter came the week the state budget writing committee took up the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

Named for Wisconsin conservation minded Republican Governor Warren Knowles and Democratic Governor Gaylord Nelson the bipartisan program usually gathers broad support. Created in 1989, the Stewardship Program provides money for purchase of lands for recreation and preservation.

According to the state's Blue Book, over the two decades of its existence, the program spent over \$500 million to acquire over 500,000 acres. State officials often work with land conservation groups who acquire the land with grants from the state and donations from individuals and use volunteer labor to maintain the land.

Just a year ago the Nature Conservancy purchased the "Twin Bluffs", 161 acres of bluff land overlooking the Mississippi River village of Nelson. The land acquisition was made possible with a \$300,000 grant from the Stewardship Program. Landowners sold land to the Nature Conservancy to protect the land including protection from sand mine development.

The state uses bonding authority – the sale of bonds is how the state takes on debt- to finance the Stewardship Program. Increasing debt was the justification for members of the budget writing committee to vote to cut the Stewardship Program.

In a partisan vote, the committee trimmed funds by a little more than 20% in the first year of the coming budget and another 9% going forward. Land conservation groups were justifiably unhappy with the cuts.

But what they found more disturbing was the Finance Committee's vote to require the state sell over 10,000 acres of Stewardship land in the next four years and require the sale of at least 250 acres more of farmland every year for the next seven years.

The Finance committee action will have conservation officials draw a line around the boundaries of projects established by May 1, 2013 and sell all land not within those boundaries and acquire no new land that is not within these boundaries.

In this rather cryptic description I was left to wonder what exactly the budget committee had in mind for land sales over the next few years.

Using increasing debt as the justification for the seeming shutdown of future projects may be the way Republicans obtain citizen support for the changes to the Stewardship program.

The gentleman who wrote to me about the Stewardship Fund shared his thoughts on spending:

"I voted Republican in the last election largely because I thought it was imperative to bring our state spending under control by making tough decisions. I still support that objective and the way it was done".

That debt is climbing is indisputable. But conservation groups, like Gathering Waters Conservancy, argue the cause is not the Stewardship Fund. While state debt has increased,

the program's contribution to the debt remained relatively stable.

Cynics in the Capitol suggest there is another intent among leaders that has nothing to do with reining in state debt. Some allege there is a connection between the Governor's request in the budget to sell off state assets in possible "no bid" contracts and the sale of thousands of acres of Stewardship land.

Clean Wisconsin, an environmental leader in the state, in a prepared statement, asked "What will they sell? The 400 acres of Stewardship land at Devil's Lake? Protected parts of the Ice Age Trail? It's disheartening and frustrating that the Legislature put stewardship back on the chopping block and now wants to sell off these precious resources to the highest bidder."

I would argue that if the sale of state assets passes as written, there may be a sale – but it doesn't have to be the highest bidder.

No conservation-minded Democrat or Republican should support a no-bid sale of state Stewardship land.

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