

4/20/2021

To: Honorable Members of the Wisconsin Legislature Joint Finance Committee

Re: Testimony on Biennial Budget-Supporting Regional Economics with Focus on Natural Resource Assets

Dear Members,

As Wisconsin builds a Biennial Budget reflecting sound economic policy, efforts must include consideration of how that budget supports the unique assets which serve as the basis of building economic sustainability and resiliency. In the region bordering Lake Superior, Ashland, and Bayfield Counties specifically, tourism, sustainable small business/agriculture/ forest harvest propel our economy. By definition, a sound infrastructure and clean water as part of intact ecosystems are essential assets to each of these economic sectors.

While the people of the North are resilient, hardworking citizens committed to building on our history and our assets as we pursue a sustainable future, we have reached a breaking point. Recent experience with global crises such as COVID and more frequent extreme weather events make it clear we cannot succeed without the support of funds from Federal and State government. Our stories make this quite evident.

Stories:

- Elder Ashland resident experienced sewer backup in basement of modern ranch home X3 due to heavy rains and failure of aged city sewer infrastructure. Not covered by insurance.
- Second largest dairy farm family is Ashland County unable to ship milk due to washouts of township roads after flooding due to 16 inches of rain overnight.

- Elderly rural homeowner hauled water for consumption and household use for over a year after floods contributed to contamination of homesteads shallow well.
- Chicago family (parents and 2 youngsters) found on HWY 13 unable to reach vacation destination in Bayfield due to flood caused washout of 2 bridges on State Hwy 13. Local residents guided family thru maze of backroads, many only single lane, enabling them to enjoy their 1 week yearly vacation.
- Heavy delivery trucks/semi's headed to Ashland businesses followed same backroads but in doing so threatened emergency routes for local residents to medical care in Ashland.
- Canadian Northern RR bridges and tracks washed out in floods have been abandoned, leaving loggers with only option of increased transport on town roads and State highways thus threatening infrastructure security.
- Recurrent heavy rains in association with increase high winds are causing erosion/silting and damage to shorelines and thus waters of Lake Superior and trout streams of our watersheds. This has been especially true in our agricultural regions.

The stories are but a handful of experiences in our neighborhoods and countryside. The proposed WI Biennial Budget offers direct answers to address our concerns and support our regional goal of developing a resilient and sustainable economy in the North. We ask your support in our endeavors. Specifically, please support the following:

Infrastructure – (Investment in infrastructures supporting our 4 sectors of economy)

1, Adequate and Resilient Roads and Modes of Transport

- Increase investment in general transportation operating aid for cities, villages, towns and counties.
- Invest in our state harbors and rails.
- Invest in the roads necessary to ensure success of the 100 million earmarked for Ag Market Development and Meat Processing Grants and

thus support local markets, food security. (BUY WIS and Buy Local Campaign)

- Allow local governments to collaborate to create and fund cross-jurisdiction transit corridors.
- Reintroduce 75 Million for Multimodal local supplement allowing local governments to select projects to most benefit community and economy.
- Reinstating the TAP funding program for walking and biking infrastructure and fund it at \$10m per year.

2.. Recreational Facilities (Building on WI's historical investment and the lesson of COVID-19 pandemic reinforcing the importance of outdoor recreational opportunities)

- Reinstating the TAP funding program for walking and biking infrastructure and fund it at \$10m per year.
- Preserve our public lands by reauthorizing the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program for 10 years with \$70 million in annual bonding authority thus preserving and promoting economic growth in tourism.
- Invest an additional \$95,000 SEG annually for costs related to parks upkeep and \$156,000 SEG annual to hire LTEs to help maintain the parks.
- Build on the GoWild system thru funding for the DNR to accept the federal Every Kid Outdoors pass at state parks, allowing free access for fourth graders and their families. This is a nominal cost that increases park access and the tourism economy.

3. Recharge Stations & Public transportation:

- Supporting non-driver modes of transportation by increasing the public transportation by at least \$50m per year and increase paratransit and specialized transportation budgets.
- Authorize \$5 million in bonding for electric vehicle charging infrastructure to allow greater use of electric vehicles throughout the state.

- Allocates the remaining Volkswagen emissions settlement funds by appropriating \$10 million to support the reinstatement of the electric vehicle charging station grant program.

4. Residential and Commercial Building Resiliency:

- Double the required utility contribution for the Focus on Energy program from 1.2 percent to 2.4 percent of annual operating revenues, thus generating an additional \$100 million in funding for the Focus on Energy Program serving both business and residential needs,
- Enhance current workforce training in the building trades as a whole with focus on new sustain technologies.
- Include the addition of solar panels as an eligible measure for the Weatherization Program and add criteria for a low-income solar subscription or grant program.

5. Broadband: With 2021 being declared the "Year of Broadband" in Wisconsin, invest over \$200 million to expand broadband access in Wisconsin:

- increase in funding for the Broadband Expansion Grant Program at the Public Service Commission to \$151.7 million over the biennium and the statutorily required minimum of at least \$2 million annually in funding from the state's Universal Service Fund.
- Eliminate several statutory restrictions for certain municipalities defined as broadband "underserved" or "unserved" to directly invest in broadband infrastructure and provide service to residents. Allow these communities to apply directly for broadband grants from the Public Service Commission
- Create a Broadband Line Extension Grant Program, funded at \$1.75 million GPR in fiscal year 2021-22 and \$3.5 million GPR in fiscal year 2022-23, to provide grants and financial assistance to eligible households to subsidize the cost of a line extension

from existing broadband infrastructure to a residence without access to 25/3 mbps service. Provide 1.0 FTE GPR position and associated funding to the State Broadband Office to assist with the initiative.

- Create an Internet assistance program at the Department of Children and Families, funded at \$20 million annually, including \$10 million GPR and \$10 million TANF funds, to subsidize the cost of a monthly Internet subscription for families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. In addition, provide 1.0 FTE position to administer the program.

Water Quality (Expansion of successful programs to help Wisconsin communities mitigate impacts of chronic flooding/extreme winds and thru resiliency planning to protect water quality)

1. Stormwater abatement/Sewer Overflow

- Invest in farmer/watershed partner-led innovations by creating new grant programs to help farmers implement best practices, address local watershed issues, and reduce runoff.
- In recognition of the critical consultation role of County Conservationists invest \$3,600,000 in fiscal year 2021-22 and \$3,708,000 in fiscal year 2022-23
- Invest in county conservation staffing grant at an additional \$1.8 million per year with focus on work to help build resiliency plans addressing impacts of flooding and increased wind events.
- increase funding education (Tech colleges, UW-Ext) & WEDA to enhance business consultation and Producer Services for established and new farmers with focus on best management opportunities and sustainable innovations.
- Build on the history of Coops to address farm and rural economic problems allotting WEDA funds to provide grants for Business Feasibility Plans for cooperative ventures.

- Reauthorize/fund for 10-years the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program as protected wetlands enhance flood abatement
- Invest \$300,000 and direct the Fertilizer Research Council to work with stakeholders for development of a Leaching model for WI.
- Authorize DATCP to work with USDA for a Cover Crop Insurance Prem Rebate Program-\$5 /acre of cover crop
- Provides \$645,000 in fiscal year 2021-22 and \$995,000 in fiscal year 2022-23 for the Urban Forestry Program.
- Increase the Wisconsin Forest Landowner Grant by \$325,000 in each year.
- Invest \$540,000 annually in grant funding to combat terrestrial invasive species.
- Provide \$12 million in bonding authority for urban nonpoint source cost-sharing and municipal flood control program.
- Fund \$1 million in each year of the biennium for the preparation of flood insurance studies and other flood mapping projects.
- Provides the DNR with 1.0 FTE position to identify and map structures residing within floodways addressing those properties already impacted by flooding and erosion.
- Fund \$5 million in startup funds for a Great Lakes Erosion Control Loan program, a revolving loan program to assist municipalities and owners of homes located on the shore of Lake Michigan or Lake Superior where the structural integrity of municipal buildings or homes is threatened by erosion of the shoreline.
- Provide \$7 million in bonding authority for the Soil and Water Resource Management (SWRM) program and the \$6.5 million in bonding for the Target Runoff Management (TRM) program (DNR and DATCP collaboration)
- Invest \$25 million in bonding authority to clean up the toxic sediment at the bottom of many of Wisconsin's lakes and rivers (Eg. DDT, PCBs, and heavy metals)

- Increases to \$1 million the annual statutory cap in the nutrient management program for producer-led watershed grants.
- Provide \$320,000 GPR annually to support the establishment of a statewide grazing education grant program and assist producers who incorporate regenerative agricultural practices.
- Fund certification of producers through the Alliance for Water Stewardship program

2. Water Quality Programs

- *Increase the well compensation grant program funding available to \$800,000 per year and increasing the annual income to \$100,000.*
- Providing \$40 million in bonding for the replacement of lead service lines
- providing \$500,000 for a pilot program that awards grants to farmers to implement management practices which reduce nitrate loading which contributes to human health risks.
- PFAS impacts tourism-fishing and hunting and a healthy community in which to live and visit. Invest approximately \$25 million over the biennium to comprehensively address PFAS contamination:
 - \$750,000 in fiscal year 2021-22 to test public water supply wells deemed most susceptible to PFAS contamination.
 - \$55,000 annually to survey 44 large rivers across the state annually to analyze and track trends in water quality related to PFAS.
 - \$25,000 annually in testing for wastewater treatment facilities.
 - Increase/fund the staffing at the DNR by 11.0 FTE positions to implement the Wisconsin PFAS Action Council's action plan.
 - allot \$600,000 annually, on an ongoing basis to test for and mitigate PFAS at state-led sites.
 - Fund the DNR's monitoring of PFAS levels in wildlife and, in coordination with the DHS, develop health advisories for consumption of PFAS-contaminated wildlife.

- provides assistance and resources grants to local communities that are impacted by PFAS contamination at level of \$10 million GPR in each year.
- \$1 million to assist local fire departments in removing PFAS from their stations.

In conclusion, if Up North Wisconsin is to build upon the 4 sectors of our economy as identified, equitable investment at the State Level is essential. Without such support, the region will be increasingly unable to both maintain a healthy and vibrant community for its residents, businesses and visitors, let alone contribute to a strong Wisconsin economy.

The norm may well become one in which County and municipal budgets of this region face shortfalls to support even basic services, as is the current crisis in Ashland county. It is time for the State to invest with equity and not shut out regions vital to Wisconsin's economy.

We ask simple consideration and support our requests.

Respectfully submitted,


Sue Niemi

President, League of Women Voters/Ashland & Bayfield Counties

(The LWV/ABC is nonpartisan organization whose main objective is to promote political responsibility through the informed and active participation of all citizens in government at all levels, especially local. [Http://lww-abcwi.org](http://lww-abcwi.org))