



ROB SWEARINGEN

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Testimony for Assembly Bill 422 Assembly Committee on Environment and Forestry November 17, 2015

I would like to thank Chairman Jeff Mursau and the entire Assembly Committee on the Environment and Forestry for allowing me to testify on Assembly Bill 422.

Assembly Bill 422 was drafted at the request of community leaders and residents of Florence WI. Our office was contacted by a number of elected officials and concerned citizens in Florence County in regards to the loss in funding.

The Natural Resource and Wild Rivers Interpretive Center was built in 1992. It was and still is a very unique combination of all the natural resource related agencies sharing space, resources and collaborating on projects. Under one roof, this building houses the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI-DNR), United State Forest Service (USFS), Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), UW-Extension, and County Forestry & Parks. The Wild Rivers Interpretive visitor center also sells DNR licenses and provides a public conference room that many groups, agencies and legislators use.

The Governor's budget cut funding for this facility that is used to pay for some of the staff time for the main public service desk that serves many purposes. It functions as a visitor desk with recreational info for visitors, it sells all the DNR licenses and registrations, it takes questions from the public and guides them to the proper office/department within the building as it oversees the Wild Rivers Interpretive center displays and information. A budget motion was submitted from both Senator Tiffany's and my office in an attempt to restore the funding, but the motion did not survive the budget process. As the bill is written, the restored funding will come from the Conservation Fund.

I would like to thank Representative Mursau and Senator Tiffany for their assistance and support of this proposal.

I am hoping for strong bipartisan support for this legislation.

Wild Rivers Interpretive Center, Florence WI.





Florence County Forestry and Parks

Florence Natural Resource Center
5617 Forestry Drive, Florence, Wisconsin 54121

February 17, 2015

Dear Senator Tiffany and Representative Swearingen,

As the administrator to Florence County Forestry and Parks, I have been to several meetings concerning Governor Walkers 2015/2017 budget cuts. This letter is to address my concerns regarding a funding cut to State Statute 30.25 which partially funds the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. As you are aware, this facility is unlike any in the state of Wisconsin. It houses the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the United States Forest Service, the University of Wisconsin Extension, the Florence County Forestry and Parks as well as the State of Wisconsin Department of Motor Vehicles. Besides housing this vast array of agencies under one roof, it also houses the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center (Visitor Center) which is the hub of the building for all information being sought after by local visitors as well as visitors traveling through our area. It is staffed by the director and three part-time employees.

The Visitor Center for Florence County also sells Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource licenses, registers boats, ATV's, and snowmobiles for the state of Wisconsin. This facility is strategically located as a gateway to Wisconsin bordering our neighboring state of Michigan. Annually several hundred students pass through these doors to learn management practices in forestry education. In 2014 we welcomed approximately 20,000 visitors to our fine facility.

The funding cut for this portion of our building would cause loss of frontline employees, not to mention forcing the facility to reduce its service hours to visitors. Staffing has always been an issue due to low funding, so agencies that are represented at the service counter have offered funding in small increments over the years to keep the public serviced daily. By removing the funding through the state of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the frontline would not be able to accommodate visitors who have been accustomed to excellent service at the Visitor Center.

We would like to continue serving visitors (20,000 in 2014) to our great state of Wisconsin in 2015. Reinstating this funding would ensure uninterrupted service to all of those who enter our fine building which represents Wisconsin at its best.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pat Smith", is written over the typed name.

Pat Smith

Florence County Forest Administrator

PATRICK J. SMITH
COUNTY FOREST ADMINISTRATOR

E-mail: psmith@co.florence.wi.us

Tourism and Economic Development

Good morning and thank you for listening to our testimony today. My name is Wendy Gehlhoff, I have been the Economic Development Director for Florence County for the last 11 years. The top 3 goals of my job are growing the number and size of our businesses, strengthening the quality of life in our communities and attracting new visitors. These goals are directly tied to the continued operation of the Public Information desk in our Wild Rivers Interpretive Center located on US 2. It should be noted that the Center's location on US 2 acts as a doorway to the state of Wisconsin from Michigan coming from both the east and west direction.

Our largest industry cluster by number of businesses and jobs is the tourism industry. So by working to attract new visitors, we are helping our tourism based businesses grow. Visitor attraction takes place by attending targeted trade shows, running radio ads highlighting our key events and recreational assets, website and social media activities and a variety of printed materials. All of these advertising methods send people to our Public Information desk to obtain more information or as a starting point for their trip to Florence County. Over the last 5 years we have worked hard to help people discover our small county and put us on the map. Because resources are tight yielding only a small advertising budget we have leveraged our efforts via Department of Tourism JEM grants and social media – our facebook page has 8,349 likes. One of the JEM grants helped us advertise the new Wisconsin Wild Rivers Tour that we facilitated. This project brought together state departments of Tourism, DOT and DNR along with our local departments to allow creation and placement of new state highway signs marking 15 access points so our visitors can more easily use our state designated Wild Rivers. The starting point for this Wild Rivers Tour is the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center.

The growth of our tourism industry and related tourism businesses is evidenced by our County Sales tax growth. From 2010 to 2014, our County Sales tax grew 19% and we are on track for 3-4% growth this year as well. Our tourism economic impact as measured by the Department of Tourism also grew 4% last year. The public information desk not only answers a wide range of questions that DNR, USFS and County staff do not get interrupted to answer, but they also direct visitors to area businesses that provide the products and services they need. By cutting the DNR portion of the public information desk funding, the public service hours will need to be cut thus reducing the referrals to our local business community. This will hurt the forward progress we have made over the last 5 years in tourism promotion and the associated sales growth for our businesses.

So in closing, I ask that you vote in favor of Assembly Bill 422 to reinstate funding to our Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. As mentioned, the center sells over \$40,000 in licenses, permits and registrations each year. And more importantly, this center has saved all the co-located agencies a great deal of money since 1992. If each entity had their own facility, they would have paid one of their own employee's wages and benefits to staff their own public information desk. The Wild Rivers Interpretive Center saves tax payers money by allowing all agencies to share in the cost of one information desk using an employee at a lower wage with no benefits. Thank you for your time.



FLORENCE COUNTY
Economic Development Commission
Helping Business Grow
Wendy Gehlhoff – Director
P.O. Box 88, Florence, WI 54121

February 16, 2015

Dear Senator Tiffany and Representative Swearingen:

Governor Walker's 2015/2017 budget includes the following: "Under current law, DNR administers various grant and financial assistance programs. This bill eliminates the following: **5. Funding for the operational costs of the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center.**"

In 1992, Florence County built a unique facility called the Natural Resource and Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. This was and still is the only center in the state that houses county, state and federal natural resource based offices all under one roof. Not only is this more convenient for the public who may not know which entity can answer their questions, but there is cost savings for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), US Forest Service (USFS) and the Florence County Forestry and Parks (FCF&P) Department to share a building, equipment, resources and especially to share the cost of staffing the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center (WRIC) to help the public find the information they need.

The County (\$34,000) and USFS (\$14,000) have shared proportional costs of running this information center since 1992. The WDNR, however, did not contribute to these operational costs until 2007 when **State Statute 30.255** was passed: ***Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. Beginning with fiscal year 2007-08, the department shall provide a grant in the amount of \$27,000 in each fiscal year to the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center to be used for park and recreation uses, forestry education, and tourist information provided by the center and for its operational costs.*** In 2008, an "Operation and Maintenance Agreement Supplement No. 4 to Joint Development Agreement for Florence Combined Natural Resources Center" was signed by the USFS, WDNR and FCF&P that stipulates all three entities will contribute either staffing or funding for the WRIC.

The 2015/2017 budget bill eliminates this WDNR funding therefore the WRIC will have to cut staff and reduce the hours it can serve the public. This will impact access to WDNR licenses and registrations. Last year the WRIC sold over \$40,000 of licenses and registrations. There were 18,390 visitors who entered the facility, and 405 information packets were mailed out to visitors requesting information from the WRIC. This building also houses UW-Extension and Department of Motor Vehicle offices who benefit from having a front desk to direct them to the proper person for assistance.

The WRIC is also the starting point for the new Wisconsin Wild Rivers Tour, a two year multi agency state and county level project that created a 100 mile signed route with 15 public access points on the 1965 State designated Wild Rivers; the Pine and the Popple. This summer, Saturday, June 13th, state level officials will be attending a 50th Anniversary of the Wild Rivers Celebration event at our WRIC facility. With reduced funding, we cannot staff the center on Saturdays, which will not only impact this event, but our visiting public in general.

In closing, please work with us to create a budget motion to reinstate this very important funding for our state, federal and local public information center: the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center.

Sincerely,

Wendy Gehlhoff – Director
Florence County Economic Development

cc: Governor Walker, Tourism Secretary Klett,
WDNR Secretary Stepp, CNNF Supervisor Strong



FLORENCE NATURAL RESOURCE AND WILD RIVERS INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Lori L. Moore
5628 Forestry Drive
Florence, WI
54121

Director of Education and Promotion
Phone (715) 528-5377 ext. 101
Toll Free (888) 889-0049
Fax (715) 528-5172

Email: lmoore@florencewisconsin.com

February 17, 2015

Dear Senator Tiffany and Representative Swearingen,

The news of the recent budget cuts by Governor Walker which help fund the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center, State Statute 30.255 has come at a time when funding for this facility could not be more important. These funds are used to partially fund employees who are frontline ambassadors for Wisconsin. When visitors, (approximately 20,000 in 2014) come through the doors of this multi-agency building to be served, we are confident that they leave knowing they have received the most comprehensive information that the Wisconsin DNR, US Forest Service and the Florence County Forestry and Parks has to offer. We maintain a frontline that completes Wisconsin DNR licensing as well as Wisconsin registrations for boats; ATV/UTV's and snowmobiles. In 2014 the facility collected \$40,000.00 in revenues for the State of Wisconsin.

As the Director of The Wild Rivers Interpretive Center I rely on this funding to keep our frontline staffed and educational displays kept up to date. This cut in funding would force us to let our staff go, and reduce the hours at our facility that are needed by the Florence community and the visiting public.

We have a facility that is unlike any other in the State of Wisconsin, and all agencies involved have worked tirelessly for years on shoestring budgets to make The Florence Natural Resource and Wild Rivers Interpretive Center (Visitor Center) a showplace for Wisconsin due to its proximity to our neighboring border state of Michigan.

We would like to continue serving visitors to our great state of Wisconsin. So, we ask that you would consider re-instating the funding that has become a vital part of operating the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center.

Sincerely,

Lori L. Moore
Wild Rivers Interpretive Center
Director

Wisconsin County Forests Association

Norman Bickford
President
Webster, Wisconsin

Tom Rudolph
Vice President
Rhineland, Wisconsin

Beverly Larson
Treasurer
Wonewoc, Wisconsin

Greg Sekela
Director
Gillett, Wisconsin

Al Mans
Director
Marinette, Wisconsin

Carl Vander Sanden
Director
Gleason, Wisconsin

Chuck Zenner
Director
Medford, Wisconsin

Ed Kelley
Director
Florence, Wisconsin

Bill Schradle
Director
Clayton, Wisconsin

Paul Lokken, Sr.
Director
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

John Robinson
Director
Superior, Wisconsin

Tom Thompson, Jr.
Director
Mercer, Wisconsin

L.H. "Skip" Fiedler
Director
Minong, Wisconsin

Phil Schneider
Director
Sheldon, Wisconsin

Joe Waichulis
Director
Thorp, Wisconsin

Michael Luedeke
Director-at-Large
Spooner, Wisconsin

Henry Schienebeck
Director-at-Large
Butternut, Wisconsin

Jane Severt, Executive Director
3243 Golf Course Road
P.O. Box 70
Rhineland, WI 54501

November 17, 2015

Representative Jeff Mursau
Chair, Assembly Committee on Environment and Forestry
Room 113 West
State Capitol
P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Regarding: 2015 AB 422

Representative Mursau,

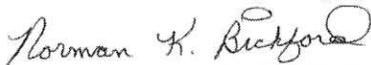
Please accept this written testimony from Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) supporting 2015 AB422.

WCFA represents the forestry interests of 29 counties with lands enrolled under state statutes §28.10 and §28.11, Wisconsin's County Forest Law. Collectively our member counties manage nearly 2.4 million acres of forest lands, the largest public ownership in the state.

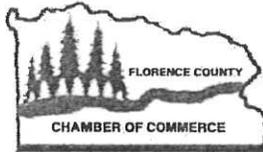
We feel it is extremely important for the State of Wisconsin to fulfill its obligation to Florence County by providing the state's share of operational funding for the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. Therefore, we fully support the annual allocation of \$27,000 contained in 2015 AB422.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony, if we can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact our office.

Sincerely,


Norman K. Bickford, President
Wisconsin County Forests Association


Jane F. Severt, Executive Director
Wisconsin County Forests Association



Florence County Chamber of Commerce, Inc.

P.O. Box 643- Florence, WI 54121

February 19, 2015

Dear Senator Tiffany and Representative Swearingen:

It has come to my attention that Governor Walker's 2015/2015 budget proposal eliminates funding from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to help staff and supply the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center in Florence, WI. This loss of funding will require the Center to cut the hours it is open to the public, reduce the number of natural resource based educational programs and hamper its ability to provide natural resource based materials for our visitors and residents.

The Wild Rivers Interpretive Center is a unique multi-agency facility unlike no other in the state. It houses all the natural resource based state, federal and county based entities under one roof: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, US Forest Service and Florence County Forestry & Parks. It also houses the Department of Motor Vehicles, UW-Extension offices and a public conference room that is used by clubs, organizations and legislators for town hall meetings and presentations. By having all of these government agencies combined in one building, they are able to share costs for staff, equipment, materials and utilities thus reducing tax payer expense.

The Wild Rivers Interpretive Center performs the function of a front desk and information center for all these agencies. Center staff handles WDNR licenses, registrations, USFS permits, directs the public to the correct office within the building to get their unique questions answered and provides tourism information to travelers who want to explore the many public lands and recreation areas under WDNR, USFS or County management. The Center also maintains and updates a variety of educational displays, murals and printed materials to educate the public about our rich natural resource based environment.

In closing, I strongly urge you to write a budget motion to reinstate the \$27,000 of funding so the state continues to provide their fair share of the cost to operate this multi-agency public information center.

Sincerely,

Rick Knepper – President
Florence County Chamber of Commerce

cc: Governor Walker, Tourism Secretary Klett, WDNR Secretary Stepp, CNNF Forest Supervisor Strong

Resolution #2015 - 7

Restoring Funding for Wild Rivers Interpretive Center, Florence

WHEREAS, In 1992 Florence County, The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources(WDNR), and the United States Forest Service (USFS) entered into an agreement to build and maintain the Florence Natural Resource Center and Wild Rivers Interpretive Center; and

WHEREAS, The vision of this facility was for the benefit of the public to come to one location for all of their natural resource questions, the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center serves an important role in providing the information and staff to direct the public to the appropriate office and resource; and

WHEREAS, Florence County provides \$34,000 per year in funding, and the USFS has provided up to \$14,000 per year in funding and staff to run the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center since it opened in 1992; and

WHEREAS, Per the Operation and Maintenance Agreement Supplement No. 4 to Joint Development Agreement for Florence Combined Natural Resources Center, Item #4 Public Information Center: *Recognizing that public information is an important function of FOREST SERVICE, COUNTY, and STATE, a staffed Information Center will be part of the Administration Office. The Friends of the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center will make sure that the Information Center is adequately staffed to serve the public. The Information Center will respond to walk-ins, mail, telephone, and radio requests for information regarding the County, State, National, and private parks, roads, and national forest. Therefore, COUNTY, FOREST SERVICE, and STATE will provide staffing by existing employees unless otherwise agreed*

WHEREAS, The WDNR first started to provide funding to the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center in 2007/2008 per state statute 30.255 **Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center**. *Beginning with fiscal year 2007-08, the department shall provide a grant in the amount of \$27,000 in each fiscal year to the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center to be used for park and recreation uses, forestry education, and tourist information provided by the center and for its operational costs; and*

WHEREAS, this facility provides the citizens of Florence County and the State of Wisconsin a place to purchase WDNR licenses, register boats, ATV's and Snowmobiles, and find out what the public lands, such as the state designated and managed Pine/Popple Wild Rivers and Spread Eagle Barrens, have to offer in Florence County; and

WHEREAS, without the funding from the WDNR this facility will not be able to function for the public to its best ability; and

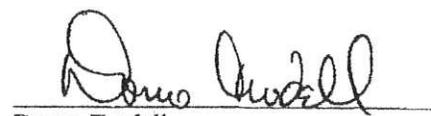
WHEREAS, the Friends of the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center will need to layoff employees and reduce the hours the facility is open.

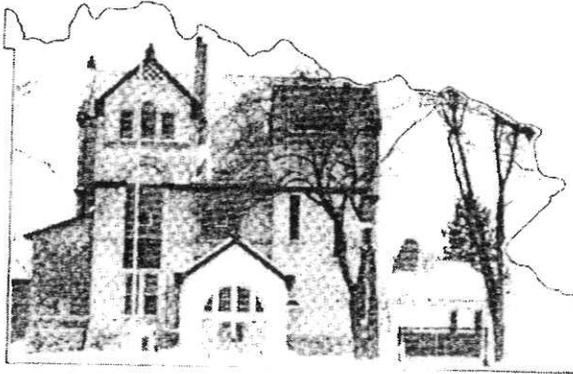
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Florence County Board of Supervisors, opposes the currently proposed budget removing the funding for the Wild Rivers Interpretive Center, and asks that the funding be restored to its original amount of \$27,000 per year.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that copies of this resolution are sent to Governor Scott Walker, Secretary of the WDNR Stepp, Secretary of Department of Tourism Klett, Representative Swearingen, Representative Mursau, Senator Tiffany, Florence/Forest DNR Team Leader Craig Williams, USFS District Ranger Joel Skjerven, USFS CNNF Forest Supervisor Paul Strong

Approved and adopted this 17th day of February, 2015.


Jeanette Bomberg, Chair
Florence County Board of Supervisors


Donna Trudell
County Clerk



Office of the
County Clerk
Donna Trudell, County Clerk
Florence County
Board of Supervisors

Representative Jeffrey Mursau
Chairman of Committee on Environment and Forestry
Room 113 West, State Capitol,
P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

November 10, 2015

Dear Chairman Mursau,

The Florence County Board of Supervisors took action today to urge you to support AB 422 relating to funding for the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center. Local officials appreciate your support of this bill that would provide critical operational costs for park and recreation uses, forestry education, and tourist information to northeastern Wisconsin.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Jeanette Bomberg, Chairwoman
Florence County Board of Supervisors

cc: Representative Rob Swearingen, Senator Tom Tiffany, and the Florence Mining News

501 Lake Ave. - P.O. Box 410 - Florence, Wisconsin 54121- (715) 528-3201 - Fax (715) 528-4762



University of Wisconsin-Extension

Meg Dallapiazza

Youth Development Agent
Florence Natural Resource Center
5628 Forestry Dr.
Florence, WI 54121
e-mail: meg.dallapiazza@ces.uwex.edu

Cooperative Extension

Florence County Extension Office
Phone: (715)528-5490 ext. 114
TTY: 711
Fax: (715)528-5172

February 13, 2015

Dear Senator Tiffany and Representative Swearingen,

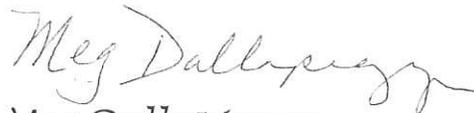
I understand the Governor Walker's 2015/2017 budget includes cutting funding for state statute 30.255 that partially funds the **Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center (FWRIC)**. Since 2007, the DNR has provide a grant in the amount of \$27,000 to the Florence Wild Rivers Interpretive Center to be used for park and recreation uses, **forestry education**, and tourist information provided by the center and for its operational costs.

As the 4-H Youth Development Agent with UW-Extension, I rely on the Interpretive Center forestry, wildlife and fisheries display for teaching our natural education programs. One program is a semester class on best management practices in forestry education. Annually we serve several hundred students from college to elementary school ages. Teaching them about not only being good stewards of the natural resources, but we strong emphasis the vast array of careers that provide a family living wage in these fields right here in our county. We are stressing that you don't have to leave our rural community to make a good living while enjoying all our rural areas have to offer.

The displays that are developed, maintained and updated that teach about best practices in forestry, wildlife and fisheries management are done by the combined efforts of the staff at the FWRIC. Cutting this funding would be a big step backwards for the center and our mission to **educate** not only our students but the nearly 20,000 visitors that walk through these doors. The FWRIC is strategically located as a gateway to Wisconsin and directs people where they can spend not only their time but their money in Wisconsin.

For these reasons and many more I hope you will consider reinstating this vital funding to our rural area. Thank you for your dedication as you work to best represent our area.

Sincerely,


Meg Dallapiazza