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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1<sup>ST</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Tourism

### Assembly Bill 567

Wednesday, Oct. 20, 2021

Thank you Chairman Tranel and committee members for holding a public hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 567, legislation that directs the governor to use \$750,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to rehabilitate the iconic observation tower at Potawatomi State Park in Door County.

For generations, Potawatomi State Park has been drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors every year who climb the tower to take in the spectacular views. As you will hear, our community is in near unanimous agreement that the tower should be repaired, a consensus that even cuts across party lines.

Originally constructed in 1932, it was the first tower built specifically for tourism, which gives it a historical significance that no other tower in the state can match. All the other towers at that time only served as lookouts for spotting fires.

Because it provided such a huge step in promoting tourism in Wisconsin, the Potawatomi Tower has been listed on both the State and National Register of Historic Places. We believe this unique observation tower should be treated differently than all other similar structures in the state.

Unfortunately, the tower was closed to the public in 2017 after the Department of Natural Resources found signs of decay and movement in the wooden structural support beams. After conducting a study of the structure, the DNR announced in April of 2018 that the tower would be shut down permanently and deconstructed due to safety concerns.

However, the Sturgeon Bay Historical Society Foundation felt that the DNR's study was limited to only damage and deterioration and did not provide restoration alternatives to determine the feasibility of saving the tower. The historical society then retained Wood Research and Development out of Oregon to perform a new study that included alternatives for restoration.

Dr. Dan Tingley, the executive director of the company, has since determined that the tower's main supports can be saved using a process he has developed and that the vast majority of the structure's components are in acceptable condition.

Back in May of this year, Senator Jacque, representatives of the Sturgeon Bay Historical Society and I met with Secretary Cole, Steve Little and Sean Kennedy from the DNR after they had reviewed Dr. Tingley's plan for three months. Secretary Cole opened the meeting by saying, "It's a great day for Potawatomi Tower!"

In the meeting, the DNR said that, after studying Dr. Tingley's report, they had reversed their position that the tower was beyond repair and needed to be taken down. At that time, the DNR committed to repairing the tower and said that it would not be dependent on the Legislature accepting Medicaid expansion, as the governor had proposed. They stated their intention of working with DOA to advance the plan to the Building Commission. Regrettably we are now getting mixed signals from both the DNR and Department of Administration.

Yesterday afternoon, Zach Madden, the governor's legislative affairs director, issued a statement in which he said, "It is clear that the pathway presented by Dr. Tingley is not a viable option." That is a mind boggling statement that flies in the face of the DNR's previous position.

Legally, the DNR was required to submit a fiscal estimate on this bill by September 30. They have not done that.

Since the Potawatomi Tower is listed on both the State and National Register of Historic Places, the DNR is legally obligated to submit a plan for its long-term preservation. They have still not done that either.

We are proposing AB 567 to help the DNR in expediting the process. Many local experts are worried that, if we don't start fixing the tower very soon, additional decay could make it impossible to save the beloved landmark.

I would also like to point out that, because this proposed project would be considered a repair and not a rebuild, the Americans with Disabilities Act does not apply here. We support disability access and we believe there are options available that can be implemented down the road, but our top priority right now must be to save the structure.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony and I hope you consider supporting AB 567. I would be happy to answer any questions if you have them.