



# TOM TIFFANY

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

## **Stewardship: Wants Versus Needs**

*By Senator Tom Tiffany*

Since its inception, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program has purchased land and easements to more than 560,000 acres, according to the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau. Currently, public ownership of land in Wisconsin equals 18%. Purchases through the Stewardship program are costing the state \$1.6 million per week; which does not include payment in lieu of taxes the state makes to local governments after a purchase (\$28 million in the next two years) and payments on the principal of the bonds.

In fiscal year 2001-02, total Stewardship debt service payments were \$24,675,900. For fiscal year 2012-13, total debt service payments will be over \$84 million. In Governor Walker's proposed budget, the Stewardship program was authorized to issue over \$1 billion in total bonding through 2020. Debt service payments (principle payment and interest) on the total amount would inevitably push that total price tag even higher which is just not sustainable. These numbers are staggering and one of the reasons why I support modifying the governor's budget.

This week, the Wisconsin Legislature's budget committee, the Joint Finance Committee (JFC), voted to trim Wisconsin's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program by \$18 million over the next two years, leaving \$47.5 million still available for land purchases in 2013-14 and \$54.5 million in the years following. Shortly after the vote, a number of environmental groups wasted no time in putting out press releases slamming members of the JFC who supported this measure.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program is named after Republican Governor Warren Knowles and Democrat Governor Gaylord Nelson. Over the years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program has become very popular in our state, but it has also become very expensive. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program is not funded with existing state monies, but is instead funded through the issuing of bonds. Bonding is simply an IOU and it is debt put on the state credit card and those bills are coming due.

As the father of three children, I, like any other parent, worry about their future. One of the core reasons why I ran for public office was out of this concern. Just a few short years ago, Wisconsin faced a structural deficit in the billions of dollars. Through some tough decisions, we have turned the structural deficit around but bonding continues to push Wisconsin deeper into debt. Stewardship purchases, capitol and transportation building projects drive bonding levels higher with debt service payments continuing to gain a greater portion of general purpose revenue. If left unchecked, debt service payments would leave Wisconsin unable to meet future obligations and deeper cuts would have to be made in order to maintain services. While Wisconsin is on firmer financial footing than in previous years, continuing to bond at elevated levels would put our monetary stability in jeopardy.

I understand firsthand why the Stewardship program is highly regarded by so many here in the State of Wisconsin. This program has performed an important function for 20 years, but as time passes our needs change, and purchasing more



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land by the state is a want, not a need. Lawmakers have to ask themselves, do we authorize the state to buy more land or do we increase funding to education? Do we maintain our roads, rail system, and harbors or do we keep buying more land? Do we help those in need with their health care or do we buy more land? As we make these decisions, one of my top priorities is to ensure your tax dollars are spent wisely. Scaling back the amount of debt the state uses for land purchases and putting some realistic parameters on the Stewardship program is not unreasonable.

Despite the rhetoric that some groups would have you believe, Wisconsin will still be able to preserve and protect land for citizens that want to enjoy the great outdoors. These modest changes by the JFC will ensure that the Stewardship program will stay viable for the long-term, but without saddling future generations of Wisconsinites with massive amounts of debt. We teach our children to distinguish between a want and a need, we must do the same.

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*State Senator Tom Tiffany represents Wisconsin's 12<sup>th</sup> Senate District*