

It's Time for Mining Reform

Iron mining legislation has been the most prominent and most controversial topic so far this session. Emotions are running high on both sides; this tends to cloud the issue, preventing pertinent facts from coming to light. I want to explain why I will be supporting AB 1.

I am one of only six Republicans who is not a co-sponsor of AB 1 – the mining bill. Before supporting the bill, I needed to be satisfied that it was good for the environment, good for the local communities, and good for the economy.

I did my homework. I poured over the bill. I read pages and pages of economic and environmental impact statements, bill comparisons, and fiscal estimates. Finally, I toured the proposed mine site to see the area for myself.

This bill changes the permitting process for ferrous mining – it does NOT change standards for air pollution, water discharge, groundwater, or drinking water. The iron mining process uses no sulfide. If small amounts of sulfide are naturally present in the iron, this bill does not allow the DNR to grant a permit unless the mining company proves it can dispose of the waste without compromising groundwater or surface water standards.

Contrary to what you may have heard, this bill does not allow mining or the dumping of mine waste in wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, or state parks. The Great Lakes Compact protects Lake Superior and is NOT changed by this bill. Further, this bill does not exempt a mining company from zoning ordinances – in fact, the bill adds a condition requiring that a proposed mine would have to meet or exceed current DNR zoning rules.

As a town board chairman, I am sensitive to the fact that local municipalities and individuals must be a part of the process. This bill keeps local governments in the loop, requiring that the mining company provide towns with the funds necessary to hire counsel for negotiations.

Additionally, a contested case hearing is still part of the process – it happens after the issuance of a permit, but before any construction has begun. Local residents continue to have a seat at the table and are provided with an avenue for recourse should the process go awry.

The potential economic impact of the mine is huge. According to the economic impact report issued by North Star Economics Inc., the construction of a mine would create 3,175 jobs and generate \$ 2 billion in economic activity over a two year period.

Once constructed, phase one of the mine would create 2,834 jobs – 700 in the mine, and an additional 2,134 jobs in other industries, principally transportation. The 700 jobs in the mine would pay an average of \$82,974 per year in wages and benefits – in an area of the state with the 2nd highest unemployment rate where the average family brings home \$13,000 less per year than the Wisconsin average. We can mine iron responsibly. It's time for us to get to work.

