

GUEST OPINION

‘Anonymous objector’ gets his/her day in court

By State Rep. Deb Andraca

Remember in 2022 when anonymous, private interests tried to derail the Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs project? After 10 years of community fundraising, organizing and grant writing, a single member of the state Legislature’s Joint Finance Committee (JFC) brought the project to a screeching halt with an “anonymous objection” and the park was almost lost to a private developer.



Andraca

On Wednesday, April 17 at 9:30 a.m., the Wisconsin Supreme Court will take on the question that was put under the microscope because of the Cedar Gorge preservation battle: is the JFC objection practice a violation of the separation of powers?

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is administered by the Department of Natural Resources, and the DNR awards grants through this program using funds that have already been appropriated by the Legislature. However, over the years laws have been passed that allow JFC to interject in DNR’s grant approval process. As a result, since 2019 members of JFC have objected to nearly one-third of all Knowles-Nelson projects before the committee — 27 projects in all. Those 27 projects stalled for an average of approximately 290 days

before action was taken in the form of approval, rejection or sometimes DNR simply withdrew the proposed project from consideration altogether.

Preserving Wisconsin’s abundant natural resources should not be a partisan or controversial issue. Preserving Wisconsin’s abundant natural resources should not be a partisan or controversial issue. In fact, the Knowles Nelson Program is named after Republican Gov. Warren Knowles and Democratic Gov. Gaylord Nelson, in honor of their appreciation and advocacy for conservation.

While the Cedar Gorge project was able to move forward thanks to a \$2.3 million ARPA grant from Gov. Evers, the core problem still remains — one anonymous member of JFC can stop Knowles-Nelson projects even though the funds have been approved in the state budget and the projects vetted by DNR. Today I serve as a member of Joint Finance. I regularly see projects denied without explanation or sitting for months on end with an objection but no scheduled hearing. This is wrong, and it is not how your government should work.

I encourage you to follow this lawsuit in Madison as it progresses because it has a direct connection to Cedar Gorge and could impact land conservation in Wisconsin for years to come. You can even watch the Supreme Court oral arguments live on Wisconsin Eye (wiseye.org).

Thanks to everyone who fought so hard to save the park and the investment from Gov. Evers, the public won the battle to protect Cedar Gorge. But it is equally important to win the war against government transparency being waged on the Joint Finance Committee. I hope the Wisconsin Supreme Court will agree.

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(State Rep. Deb Andraca, D-Whitefish Bay, represents Assembly District 23, which includes the northern suburbs of Milwaukee as well as Mequon and Thiensville.)

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