

Act now to protect lakeshore lands

Anonymous objection threatens Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs project

By Rep. Deb Andraca

During my first year in office, we have heard from constituents on a wide range of issues, but one of the most popular has been support for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. Since 1989, the program has provided matching funds to purchase and preserve Wisconsin's most important natural areas, protect water quality, and expand access to outdoor recreation areas such as our own very popular Lion's Den Gorge Nature Preserve.

So it came as a surprise to learn that a Knowles-Nelson grant for Ozaukee Washington Land Trust and Ozaukee County's Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs project is in jeopardy because of the anonymous objection of a member of the powerful state Joint Finance Committee. Without a committee hearing in the next few months, the land will likely be sold off to a private developer.

Anyone who has struggled to find a parking spot at Lion's Den Gorge Nature Preserve knows how popular this lakeside park is and how much our rapidly developing



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Ozaukee communities benefit from public green spaces. The proposed Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs Nature Center will be located just north of Lion's Den along the lakeshore, east of Highway C. Ozaukee County and the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust have been securing funds to purchase 132 acres of lakefront property on the far south end of the city of Port Washington to establish the park since July 2020.

Ozaukee County and Ozaukee Washington Land Trust successfully negotiated down the purchase price of the land and \$3.2 million in additional private and public funding has already been secured for the project, including \$10,000 from the Town of Grafton and \$200,000 from Ozaukee County. At a time when natural areas are being rapidly developed and existing parks in our area are more popular than ever, we can't let an opportunity to save a piece of our lakeshore slip away.

Preserving natural spaces like Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs should be a straightforward, nonpartisan issue for state leaders. In 1993, the Stewardship Program was renamed the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program after two of Wisconsin's revered conservation-minded leaders, Republican Warren Knowles and Democrat Gaylord Nelson. The stewardship program has a long history of bipartisan support, and for good reason. When we walk, hike, ski, or simply sit on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, we all connect to the same natural world that has inspired generations — Republicans and Democrats alike.

Unfortunately, the Legislature is also considering another bill that would weaken the Knowles-Nelson program and make it easier to sell off protected land for future development. This bill strikes at the heart of Knowles-Nelson's promise of permanently protecting our most vulnerable and unique natural areas and jeopardizes future recreational opportunities for everyone in the state.

Time is running out for the Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs project. We only have one chance to save undeveloped natural areas, and without action from the Joint Finance Committee, Ozaukee County will lose a beautiful new lakefront park. Let's not let years of community effort and investment be stopped by the political agendas of an anonymous few. Please call your state legislators, urge them to support the grant for the Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs park and to reject any effort to weaken our Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program — because our parks should transcend our politics.

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