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Committee unlikely to act on \$1.6M with other buyer in the picture, but Land Trust says it won't give up



DESPITE THE FEAR that the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee won't take up and authorize a \$1.6 million grant to help purchase the Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs Nature Preserve on Port Washington's far southeast side, Ozaukee Washington Land Trust Executive Director Tom Stolp has vowed to keep fighting for the funding. Photo by Sam Arendt

By KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM

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County may come to aid of EMS services with \$5 million



It's unlikely that the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee will take up a \$1.6 million Knowles-Nelson Stewardship grant awarded to the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust to help it acquire the Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs Nature Preserve on Port Washington's far south side, Sen. Duey Stroebel, a member of the committee, said Monday.

"I don't think it's going to happen anymore," Stroebel said.

That's because a private entity is interested in buying the 131-acre parcel, saying they will protect the environmental corridor and provide access to the Lake Michigan bluffs, he said.

"They (some committee members) believe if those things can be achieved without taxpayer money, it will be a public benefit," Stroebel said.

Unless that buyer backs out of the picture, he said, the committee won't take action to approve the Land Trust grant.

That puts the Land Trust in a precarious situation. The nonprofit organization has an agreement with Waukesha State Bank, which owns the land, to buy the property this fall for \$5 million, and not getting the stewardship grant leaves a \$1.6 million hole in its fundraising.

But the Land Trust isn't giving up on the grant without a fight, Executive Director Tom Stolp said.

"Certainly we're not quite ready to let the Joint Finance Committee off the hook," he said.

Making up for the stewardship grant would be a tremendous challenge, Stolp said.

"We're formulating Plan B as we go," he said. "We haven't given up on Plan A yet. We're not going down without a fight."

They're not alone in their fight for the grant, however. Rep. Deb Andraca sent a letter to Sen. Howard Marklein and Rep. Mark Born, chairmen of the Joint Finance Committee, asking that the committee hold a hearing and approve the Land Trust grant.

Neither has responded to her letter, she said.

"I am doing everything I can to try and move this project along," she said. "The Joint Finance Committee can meet any time it pleases. This can be taken up and approved at any time, even if the Legislature isn't in session."

The Land Trust has been working for years to obtain the property for the preserve — initially as part of the proposed Cedar Vineyard subdivision and later on its own.

Its efforts were bolstered in June when the Department of Natural Resources announced last June that it had approved a \$2.3 million stewardship grant for the purchase.

But the grant requires approval from the Joint Finance Committee, and when a legislator anonymously objected to the grant, the matter was put on hold.

Eventually, Stroebel said, the committee members agreed to a \$1.6 million grant. It was on the table for three months while the Land Trust debated whether to accept the reduced amount, and during that time the private buyer emerged.

A number of the committee members are no longer willing to provide a grant for the property because the private entity would preserve the environmental corridor and there would be public access to the bluffs, Stroebel said.

Stolp said the Land Trust didn't immediately accept the reduced grant because it needed to ensure it could raise enough money to make up the \$700,000 shortfall.

"It may not sound like a lot to the committee, but to an organization like ours, it's almost a year's operating budget. We needed to determine if we could still do this project," he said.

There was no deadline given to accept the reduced grant, Stolp added.

"We had no idea it was a last and best offer from the committee," he said.



Stolp said the Land Trust is weighing its options. Among those options is taking out a loan to cover the \$1.6 million shortfall.

“We would only undertake a loan as a last resort,” he said, adding the Land Trust would need a plan to aggressively repay the loan through fundraising. “That is definitely an option on the table.”

Ozaukee County Administrator Jason Dzwiniel said there was some informal discussion at the last Natural Resources Committee about using county funding to help make up the shortfall, but there hasn't been any formal discussions.

The Joint Finance Committee's actions raise a red flag, Andraca said, adding she fears they are part of an effort to weaken the stewardship program.

The fact that the committee's actions began with an anonymous objection troubles her, she added.

“Of all the committees, it should be the most transparent,” she said. “This sort of anonymous objection flies in the face of transparency.

“This is everything people don't like about government. This is why people get frustrated with government.”

Andraca said she's also concerned that the private buyer may be using the Land Trust's deal with Waukesha State Bank to try and negotiate a lower selling price in the end.

Stolp said he, too, wonders if this is a way to weaken the stewardship program, noting the Joint Finance Committee didn't use the real estate valuations from the DNR in reducing the grant but instead set an arbitrary amount.

It's important to call attention to the situation, he added.

“Our grant is being withheld to run out the clock on our real estate contract so a special interest can be served,” he said. “Joint Finance Committee's message is clear, when we give you our best offer, you better take it or we'll take bids from private interests.”

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