

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program: A Bipartisan Promise to Wisconsin

Every family deserves to make memories in the great outdoors of Wisconsin. From hikes along Lake Michigan to picnics in local parks, fishing trips in nearby waterways, and camping adventures near and far, we as Wisconsinites share a treasured tradition of enjoying our state's beautiful natural resources.

My own life journey is intricately connected to Wisconsin's natural places. Many of my most special memories as a child and, over the years, as a mother of four children have taken place while hiking in the woods or knee-deep in a pond close to home.

These memories are powered in-part by a remarkable state program not many people know much about—the **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program**. For over 30 years, this stewardship initiative has been one of Wisconsin's greatest bipartisan success stories, protecting over 700,000 acres of land to preserve natural areas and wildlife habitats, while also expanding opportunities for outdoor recreation across the state.

When Governor Tommy Thompson and the Legislature created this state-wide stewardship fund in 1989, Wisconsin's DNR was provided spending authority to purchase land and support recreational infrastructure for trail improvements, camping facilities, and boat launches. Most annual Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funding is spent at the local level, helping local governments and nonprofits purchase lands for nature preserves and to support projects in area parks and trails.

In fact, many local communities here in Senate District 8 have benefitted from this program! Perhaps the most well-known Knowles-Nelson project in our area is Lion's Den Gorge Nature Preserve, a 73 acre public park in Ozaukee County in the Town of Grafton, which offers gorgeous views and hiking trails along Lake Michigan's shoreline and attracts thousands of visitors every year. Other cherished Knowles-Nelson stewardship projects include the Tamarack Swamp Preservation in Menomonee Falls, which offers natural habitat for wildlife and paved paths for cyclists and walkers. Cedarburg's Interurban Trail also received stewardship funding to provide a safe path for bikers by constructing the 1.3 mile segment connecting Cedarburg to the Town of Grafton. In Mequon, Knowles-Nelson funding enabled the purchase of the lovely Donges Bay Gorge preserve by the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust, now called *Restoring Lands*.

Truly the list goes on, as overall our 8th Senate District has been fortunate to receive over \$15 million dollars from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program—funds used to preserve treasured natural places near where we live for us and our families to enjoy.

Governor Evers has proposed a 10-year reauthorization in his executive budget, including funding for nonprofit conservation organizations that help to maintain land management activities and habitat restoration efforts on existing stewardship lands. Continuing this program is vital to ensure that the state is able to preserve and properly maintain these special places in our community and across the state.

And yet, despite its well-earned success and popularity, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program is facing serious headwinds this budget cycle. Republican Leadership has placed “the odds at less than 50%” that the program will be reauthorized. Not good odds to be sure.

This warrants a call to action, considering that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund is a state program that has earned the allegiance of constituents across my Senate District. I know this first-hand, having had the opportunity to speak with thousands of people over the months of my campaign. I heard loud and clear from Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike, particularly in Ozaukee County, that they did **not** appreciate the “anonymous objector” on the Joint Finance Committee who nearly deep-sixed the funding and acquisition of the long-awaited Cedar Gorge Clay Bluffs Nature Preserve project in Port Washington. Bottom line, people in Senate District 8 deeply value and support the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program.

So what can we do to preserve this program which has championed and protected Wisconsin’s beautiful places and natural resources for so long? It’s simple—take a minute to phone or email Wisconsin’s legislative leadership— and the 16 legislators sitting on the Joint Finance Committee—and ask that they reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Wisconsinites have demonstrated that we can find common ground on issues that are important to all of us, like support for local stewardship and conservation efforts. Let's do our part to keep this bipartisan success story going strong!