



Jeff Mursau

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 36TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Assembly Committee on State Affairs

AB 688 – Establishing WI Conservation Corps

January 17, 2018

Chairman Swearingen and Committee Members –

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of AB 688, which would reestablish the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) program. This program operated in Wisconsin from 1983-2003, before it was eliminated as part of budget cuts to fix a billion budget deficit. It was at that same time that several other states eliminated their state-sponsored corps in exchange for a public-private partnership. Unfortunately, Wisconsin didn't examine that as a possibility to continue the program.

The WCC has always had bipartisan support, which is evident by the current list of cosponsors on the bill today. I was fortunate to chair the Assembly Committee that heard the bill last session. I was able to hear firsthand the positive impact the program had on individuals who came from difficult backgrounds. It provided them with educational opportunities and practical work-training that later benefited them in obtaining meaningful employment. Some of those benefits included: preparing for the high school equivalency exam and/or college entrance exam and employment planning such as: preparing a resume, job searches, practicing for job interviews, etc.

Before you today, is a substitute amendment that we introduced after meeting with AmeriCorp, current non-profit corps organizations, and Legislative Council. Together, they provided insight and constructive feedback to help improve the provisions related to the administrative process of the program and how it could work most effectively and efficiently as possible. Some of the changes include:

- Requires DOA to contract with a non-profit organization to be the program manager
 - Non-profit must have experience in grant writing and administration, natural resources conservation, and youth training, education and employment
- Program manager (instead of DOA) would be responsible for recruiting, housing, transportation, and education of the young adults participating in the WCC
- Adds disaster preparedness and relief, and construction or repair of real property improvements such as gazebos or amphitheaters to the scope of projects
- Opens the land on which projects can be done to include tribal lands, and opens the eligible project sponsors to include tribal governments

- Changes the program standard from requiring at least 50% of all work crew members to “have no post-secondary education AND have a family income of not more than 200% of the poverty line” to “have no post-secondary education OR have a family income of not more than 200% of the poverty line”
- Allows the program manager to submit a project application for other funding sources as long as the application is submitted to AmeriCorps (National and Community Service Board) and DOA
- Removes the bottom limit of \$25,000 on a DOA project grant to ensure that smaller projects are not automatically disqualified from consideration
- Adds more requirements into the content of the Annual Report to the Legislature, including educational and employment outcomes, and project locations and details

We are blessed in Wisconsin to have beautiful state parks that attract visitors from all over. In FY 2016, the DNR estimated that our state park system attracted roughly 17 million visitors, which contributed more than \$1 billion annually to the state’s economy. Maintaining our public lands to the high standards we’ve set requires a great deal of upkeep and unfortunately we’re starting to fall behind. I’m sure all of us can share a story of work that needs to be done in our own districts. Reestablishing the WCC would be a win-win for all involved. We’d be opening the door for youth to get important work skills and we’d be able to make necessary improvements on our public lands.

And finally, I’d like to recognize former State Rep. Cory Mason for all his hard work on this bill over the past few sessions. I’m thankful he asked me to join him in introducing the bill this session. This is an important bill that I know will do a lot of good for both the individuals participating in the program and the state as a whole. I’m hopeful, with this committee’s support, we can get the bill passed this session.

Once again, thank you for your consideration of AB 688 and allowing me to testify before you today.

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Testimony on 2017 Assembly Bill 688

Senator Robert Cowles

Assembly Committee on State Affairs - January 17, 2018

Thank you, committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2017 Assembly Bill 688. My name is Jason Mugnaini, and I'm testifying for Senator Cowles who is unable to make this hearing due to a scheduling conflict. This bill will reestablish the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, a program which will protect, enhance and provide access to Wisconsin's natural heritage, and encourage and enable young people to learn the value of work in a natural setting by providing employment training and career pathways.

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) was active from 1983 to 2003, during which time hundreds of young adults completed projects throughout Wisconsin with local, state, federal and nonprofit groups. Under this bill as amended, the Department of Administration would be responsible for contracting with a nonprofit organization with experience in grant writing, natural resource conservation, and youth training and education to serve as the program manager. The program manager would be responsible for, among other things, hiring, training and educating work crews. These work crews would consist of members between the ages of 16 and 25, and at least 50% of the work crew members must come from an impoverished background or have no college education.

The majority of the program's funding would come from, if approved, the National and Community Service Board. The remaining funds would come from a combination of the project sponsor, a grant program that would be established by DOA, and other grant funding sources that the program manager would apply to as they see fit. Any state funds expended are subject to a passive review by the Joint Finance Committee.

The young adults in the WCC would work on projects on public or tribal lands to enhance the conservation or enjoyment of natural resources, and serve those who use the public lands. Some of the projects that may be completed under this bill include:

- Boundary marking, fencing, landscaping, or recreational site maintenance;
- Invasive species management or rain garden installation;
- Lake or stream restoration, stream bank stabilization, or erosion control;
- Real property improvements such as constructing a gazebo or amphitheater;
- Reforestation, timber stand improvement, or prairie restoration, and;
- Trail construction or rehabilitation, or bridge or boardwalk construction.

Countless projects on public lands are yet to be completed due to a lack of available funding or manpower. Assembly Bill 688 will cut into this backlog, making necessary updates on public lands throughout the state. The projects completed by the Wisconsin Conservation Corps would be a huge benefit to the state's natural resources and wildlife, and the residents and tourists who spend time on public lands. The young adults completing these projects would have memorable outdoors experiences while gaining a new respect for our state's natural resources. Furthermore, Assembly Bill 688 will help teach young adults many of the job and life skills they need build a productive path for their future.