



March 20, 2015

Mr. Mark Johnson, Executive Director  
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
100 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Mr. Johnson,

It is apparent from the results of the March 13, 2015, Council Meeting many misconceptions and factual inaccuracies exist relating to the Mississippi Northwoods property and Crow Wing County's management of the property. The actions of a few members effectively prevented the County from presenting an update on the property, as was requested by you. It is clear there is a need to establish the facts surrounding acquisition of this property, including the Council's role in recommending County ownership of the property in fee as county forest land.

The Council's Final Report on the project, adopted March 6, 2015, illustrates the complex history of this transaction. The project's original sponsor, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), in partnership with the DNR, had sought to acquire this property for many years. As summarized in the Final Report:

“Originally it was thought that the DNR might be the permanent steward of this land given the importance of the land and the agency's long-term involvement with and interest in its protection. Ultimately, it was determined that Crow Wing County would be the permanent steward of this land due to a variety of factors including this land's proximity to other County-owned land. Accordingly, the County eventually became the grant applicant.”

The project was sponsored and presented to the Council by TPL. Crow Wing County had no role making representations about the property. The County's only testimony before the Council on the project proposal was offered by Commissioner Paul Thiede on November 15, 2011. This testimony communicated the County's position that its interest in acquiring the property was contingent on the County being able to manage the parcel as it manages other county forest lands, including for recreation and trail access. During the testimony, Commissioner Thiede made clear the County only became involved in the project after being approached by DNR Commissioner Landwehr.

It was Commissioner Landwehr- amid a political environment becoming increasingly skeptical of increased purchases of private property by the DNR, the proliferation of no net loss resolutions among Minnesota counties, and the large price tag associated with the property- who noted the need for an alternative model to state ownership of the property identifying County ownership as the preferred approach.

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**Our Mission:** Serve well. Deliver value. Drive results.

**Our Values:** Be responsible. Treat people right. Build a better future.

This Council discussed its own concerns about state ownership during its September 20, 2011 meeting, including the problems associated with creating ongoing PILT liabilities and maintenance costs associated with state ownership of conservation lands acquired with outdoor heritage funds. At that time, the Council expressed a preference for County ownership.

Following Commissioner Landwehr's suggestion, Crow Wing County became the eventual grant applicant, replacing the DNR as owner of the property. As recipient of local, state, and national conservation and environmental protection awards, and manager of over 103,000 acres of county forests following the strict environmental standards established by both the Sustainable Forest Initiative and the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®-C031953) certification standards, Crow Wing County rose to the occasion to demonstrate the role counties have to play in effectively managing conservation lands.

County ownership provided the solution to secure protection of 2.7 miles of Mississippi River shoreline and nearly 2,000 acres of forest habitat.

On future projects, this Council may choose to abandon the county-ownership model and return to the unpopular philosophy of increasing the DNR's acquisition and ownership of land in greater Minnesota. However the Council cannot choose to ignore the realities and actions of its predecessors. As is clearly stated in the Council's recommendation, and the legislature's appropriation for this project, this property was acquired in fee by the County to be added to the county forest system. Indeed, the County consistently has stated that it would manage the property just as it manages its other forest lands.

Moreover, the record before the Council has been clear on the existence and use of trails on this property. The project funding request and subsequent Accomplishment Plans drafted by TPL contain numerous references to existing and future trail use on the property- all of which were available and utilized by the Council prior to recommendation for the project. Commissioner Thiede's testimony explicitly discussed the County's intent to manage current and future trails on the property consistent with how trails are managed on all county forest lands. As for future trails, the project Accomplishment Plan dated May 11, 2012, and approved by the Council on August 1, 2012, contains the following:

“Any future (i.e. not including the existing snowmobile trail) non-paved trail considerations will follow the County's Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan as adopted by the Crow Wing County Board. If state trail designations are made possible in the future, alternate funding for the acquisition, construction, and maintenance of these segments of the property would be sought.”

This Council now suggests, in light of its evolving position on public ownership, that County management of land acquired in fee as county forest land is inconsistent with the purpose of this acquisition. As partners in this unique project, Crow Wing County and the taxpayers of Minnesota deserve more from the Council than revisionist history and political gamesmanship.

Respectfully,

Timothy J. Houle  
Crow Wing County Administrator

cc:

Bob Anderson, Chair, Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
Commissioner Tom Landwehr, DNR  
Crow Wing County Board of Commissioners  
Susan Schmidt, The Trust for Public Land