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**Eric Christensen
County Administrator**

June 8, 2016

Robert Anderson
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
State Office Building Room G95
100 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
St. Paul MN 55155

Re: County letter pertaining to "Use of Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Funds"

Dear Mr. Anderson,

I have received your correspondence of May 17th and appreciate you taking the time to address the concerns raised in the letter. I have looked over the letter and the enclosures and feel there should be a follow-up response.

Addressing the first question answered by Rick Johnson of The Nature Conservancy, I would say that we have concerns about their response. Clearly the FWS application was marked yes and Mr. Johnson is likely correct in that The Nature Conservancy's proposal was not. But because both entities were working in partnership on this project, I would hold both entities equably accountable and ask the Heritage Council why they did not question The Nature Conservancy about its lack of a need to communicate with local government. Now clearly, the definition of what constitutes a local government needs clarification. Given that the applicant on the original application was a federal agency and the granting authority was a state entity, we have a real problem with their definition of "local government" being limited to "Local MN DNR and USDA offices...." There are a lot of local governments that were kept in the dark that had more at stake than did the MN DNR or the USDA. Actually, I would consider MN DNR and USDA to be sister agencies. This is a primary concern of ours and a reason we support the need for documented contact and written acknowledgment from all levels of local government. The Nature Conservancy and the FWS might call this an undue burden. We call it common courtesy and a small price to pay for receiving millions in funding from the State of Minnesota. In addition, Neal Feeken of The Nature Conservancy appeared before our Board of Commissioners in February, along with a representative of the FWS, and admitted that The Nature Conservancy did a poor job of communicating and promised to work harder to keep the lines of communication open in the future. So I believe that we can probably agree that open communications are very important and that a breakdown in communications did occur.

Addressing the second question answered by Rick Johnson of The Nature Conservancy, I would say that he does a nice job of explaining the difference between our property taxes and the refuge revenue sharing program. However, if anybody believes that replacing \$1,636 of county controlled property tax dollars with

\$562 of money (money whose source is an uncertain revenue stream and a Congressional appropriation) is a positive thing, I ask that they allow us to take two-thirds of their next paycheck without notifying them and then get back to us. If they do not complain, I suggest they may be overpaid.

As for the correspondence from the FWS, we never received the letter dated October 2, 2014 until it was emailed to me earlier this year. We have no explanation of why we did not receive this letter. It is worth noting that nothing prevented the FWS from following up the letter with a phone call. We did however receive the letter dated February 18, 2015. What is noticeably absent is any evidence of communications from The Nature Conservancy. I know that the only reference to communicating with a local government comes to us in the original FWS application, but it is the lack of communication from The Nature Conservancy that is the real problem. Because they were the first step in a process to remove land from our tax base, they should have been required to communicate their intentions with us. This is made even more problematic by the fact that they have repeatedly assured the Kittson County Board of Commissioners that they have no intention of claiming tax exempt status on their land holdings.

The actions undertaken by The Nature Conservancy, and the less than forward manner in which they undertook them, leaves us with some concerns moving forward. Had The Nature Conservancy acquired this property and retained ownership and management, there would be no reason to write you today. And going forward, we do not disapprove of projects similar to this provided the land remains taxable. Let The Nature Conservancy add as many acres as they want to their land holdings provided they honor their commitment to Kittson County to pay taxes on their landholdings, both current and future. The subsequent transfer to USFWS should not have happened.


It is our stance that before a project is approved that involves the acquired parcel becoming tax exempt, the following should be required:

- ALL local governments are notified of the project IN ADVANCE so that they may have an opportunity to appear before the Heritage Council to have their concerns heard
- That the Grantee must provide written acknowledgment to the Heritage Council from the local governments affected by the project that they were notified of the project
- That the local governments be granted some power to voice their approval or disapproval of the project and that this approval, or lack thereof, be taken into consideration by the Heritage Council in making its funding decisions

We understand the need to preserve our environment and protect it for the enjoyment of future generations. However, in the pursuit of such endeavors we cannot trample on the rights of the citizens. We cannot help but feel that the concerns of Kittson County do not matter to those in power. We often find it is difficult for our voices to be heard by those in power in St. Paul. And whereas most of us in Kittson County have been to St. Paul (or St. Cloud...or Duluth...or Rochester, or...wherever), most people I deal with who serve us in St. Paul have never been to Kittson County. I would even go so far as to bet many in the legislature could not tell you where Kittson County is without the aid of a map.

We respectfully ask that the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council take into account the unintended consequences of its decisions, as well as the intended ones, and require its grant recipients to communicate its intentions to the citizens of Minnesota.

Sincerely,



Eric Christensen
Kittson County Administrator