

# State budget scrutiny affects river conservation project

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An Feb. 7 announcement by the DNR puts a hold on a local project focused on permanently protecting 4.3-acres inside River Falls' city limits and includes 530 lineal feet of river bank.

The L-shaped piece of land sits on the south side of the Bye, Goff and Rohde office building and is next to the north end of Riverside Drive (beside McDonald's) and the south end of Paulson Road.

Kinnickinnic River Land Trust received a letter stating that the \$3-billion budget deficit prompted a request that all agencies closely review operations.

It says all non-essential spending is being closely scrutinized, including the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

KRLT Director Nelson French shared news in early January that through a bargain-sale land contract with local business owner Chuck Bye of New Wood Forestry and Construction, the riverfront and surrounding property would be permanently protected. That would include public access for fishing, hiking, snowshoeing, bird watching, and more.

The deal included a \$277,500 grant from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

The DNR letter states, "Accordingly, at this time, the department cannot commit to funding your project this fiscal year..."

French said everyone is hopeful that the fund will be re-instated. It is on hold until at least June.

KRLT has until July 2012 to fulfill its land contract. If the grant is not approved, the land trust would either have to raise the big chunk of money itself or start over on the preservation effort.

Though many worked for nearly two years to forge the current, pending deal, French said, "You have to expect any new administration to take a look at all programs."

He adds that he and constituents think the DNR and

land trusts have the same goals. And, the beloved Kinnickinnic River usually ranks high in priority, its charm and reputation as a first-class trout stream reaching far beyond its regional watershed.

## FUND FACTS

If the name of the fund on temporary hold sounds familiar — Knowles-Nelson — that's because Warren Knowles and Gaylord Nelson are former Wisconsin governors. Knowles was a River Falls native, and Nelson was the principal founder of Earth Day.

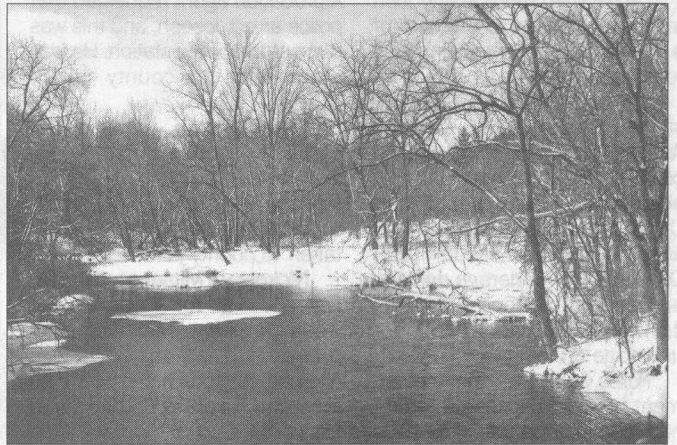
French said the men were of different political persuasions but thought alike regarding preservation of Wisconsin's natural resources.

They did not financially endow their namesake program, started by the Legislature in 1990. The fund is financed by the annual sale of general-obligation bonds; the amount was increased last year from \$60 million to \$86 million.

To date, the fund has helped permanently protect some 600,000 acres, including some of the 1,000 acres now protected within the Kinnickinnic River's watershed. Other public-access conservation areas created with the help of K-N funds include popular recreation areas such as the Chippewa and Rainbow Flowages and the Sauk Creek Nature Preserve.

Generally, the fund matches the amounts generated locally — by land trusts, citizens and local government entities — for ecologically significant projects. French says for the recent project as well as most, locals raise 50 cents for every grant dollar received. He thinks it's a good deal for all since the government essentially pays about half of the lands' appraised value and the locals achieve not only long-term protection of land but also more public-access recreation areas.

The director said a central DNR team in Madison is responsible for scrutinizing the K-N Stewardship Fund projects then reporting its



DEBBIE GRIFFIN PHOTO

A local project to permanently protect a part of the Kinnickinnic River situated inside city limits could be affected by a state review of all budget items.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE KINNICKINNIC RIVER LAND TRUST

This site map shows the shape and location of the 4.3-acre site slated for permanent conservation with financial help from the state's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund.

findings to Gov. Scott Walker.

Walker has been quoted saying the government realizes the value of the program and remains committed to its future. He also says the state must react now to alleviate the critical state of Wisconsin's budget.

The government also indicated an understanding of the link between the K-N fund and the state's multi-billion-

dollar tourism industry.

French said he expects to hear from the DNR as soon as it has anything to report.

"The land trust will do everything possible to make the project happen," he said.

Find more information about the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund online at [www.dnr.wi.gov/stewardship](http://www.dnr.wi.gov/stewardship).