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An 11th-hour move to shift habitat funds divides panel

• Some members of a legislative-citizens commission want lottery money used to create jobs.
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By DOUG SMITH
dsmith@startribune.com

After working for months deciding how to spend lottery funds totaling \$25 million, the 17-member Legislative Citizens Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) failed last week to agree on a package of environmental projects to recommend to the Legislature.

The stumbling block was an 11th-hour move to take money from projects that acquire land or easements for fish and wildlife habitat and use it for a jobs program and solar energy project.

Some critics say it is an attempt to divert dollars away from wildlife habitat projects because of the availability of revenue from the new Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. The amendment, passed by voters last fall, raises the state sales tax by 3/8 of 1 percent. Those dollars aren't supposed to supplant existing natural resource funding.

"There has been a growing chorus from LCCMR that it should no longer fund habitat acquisitions because of the new dollars [from the amendment]," said state Sen. Satveer Chaudhary, DFL-Fridley.

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Wildlife continues on B5

Move to shift habitat funds divides panel

WILDLIFE FROM B1

"That's the central motive for what's going on. I'm very concerned," said Chaudhary, who sits on the commission and was a supporter of the constitutional amendment.

"I think he's wrong," said Rep. Jean Wagenius, DFL-Minneapolis, also a commission member.

The full commission, composed of 10 legislators and seven citizens, in December had preliminarily approved a package of 33 projects for 2009 costing about \$26 million. Under the law, approval requires support of 12 members. But with the commission missing three members last Friday, the package garnered only 11 votes, meaning the commission essentially made no formal recommendation to the Legislature.

That's never happened before, officials said.

Wagenius and Rep. Lyndon Carlson, DFL-Crystal, voted against the measure.

The commission was missing three members last week because of term expirations

« IT OPENS US UP TO OTHER LEGISLATIVE MISCHIEF. »

Citizen member Jeff Broberg of St. Charles

or resignations, which likely contributed to the stalemate. But the bigger obstacle surfaced when Wagenius offered an amendment that would take about \$2.2 million from a proposal to buy land or easements for wildlife habitat. Wagenius said the money instead should be used to fund the Minnesota Conservation Corps, a nonprofit group that hires youths and young adults to work on natural resource projects, and to pay for the addition of solar energy to some state park buildings.

Wagenius said she offered the changes in response to the state's growing unemployment rate and concerns by other legislators that jobs should be part of the bill. "Our unemployment rate is skyrocketing," she said. She said the LCCMR bill will have a better chance of passage

at the Legislature if it addresses the jobs issue, too.

But other commission members were miffed that the amendment, which failed, was made at the 11th hour after they had spent months sifting through 156 proposals seeking \$105 million. Some are concerned it's pork-barrel politics and fear that legislators will circumvent the commission's efforts.

"I felt it was an insult to our process," said Nancy Gibson of Minneapolis, a citizen member.

Said Jeff Broberg of St. Charles, another citizen member: "I'm not too happy about having the rug pulled out from us by our own committee."

Al Berner of Good Thunder, another citizen member, said there was no evidence that Wagenius' proposal would create any more jobs than the projects approved by the majority of commission members.

The Legislature added citizens to the commission in 2006 in hopes of reducing pork-barrel politics, Broberg said. If the commission can't even reach agreement on a spending

package, he's afraid the Legislature simply will decide funding issues, making the commission moot.

"It opens us up to other legislative mischief," Broberg said.

Though the commission didn't vote to forward its recommendations, a bill with the list of 33 projects will be introduced in the House and Senate. Wagenius, who chairs the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance Division, said the bill undoubtedly will face amendments. "I think the bill is vulnerable," she said.

Said Chaudhary, who chairs the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee: "If the bill morphs into something that is completely different from what LCCMR recommended after many months of work, I'm pretty sure I won't support it."

Meanwhile, two new members of the commission were recently appointed, Rep. Larry Howes, R-Walker, and Rep. Ron Shimanski, R-Silver Lake. That leaves one opening still to be appointed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Minnesota Rep. Ron Shimanski

Native Minnesotan, farmer focuses on agricultural issues and fueling state's economy

by Kathryn Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)



Rep. Ron Shimanski hasn't strayed far from his family's roots — literally.

A proud fourth-generation Minnesotan, he lives about half a mile from where his great-grandfather first settled in the 1870s. His hometown of Silver Lake is about 50 miles west of the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

Shimanski, a Republican, is also carrying on a family tradition of public service.

"My grandfather was a township supervisor and my dad was a township officer," he says. "[Politics] has been in the family for generations."

But it wasn't until 2006 that he first campaigned for public office, winning a seat in the Minnesota House after receiving words of encouragement from the two lawmakers who previously held the seat.

"They said, 'By all means, go for it. You will never regret the experience.'"

Three years into the job, he says, they were right.

Spurring interest in local products

Shimanski is currently serving his second term in the House; this year was his first as assistant minority whip.

And when he isn't in the capital, he is often working on his apple orchard. In the fall, Shimanski can be found five days a week selling his apples at farmers markets throughout the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

As a farmer, Shimanski has taken a special interest in agricultural policy. One of the top issues facing small-scale farmers, he says, is the lack of interest among Minnesotans in locally grown, fresh produce.

"Just look at the tables in our markets," he says. "They are overflowing with fresh fruits and vegetables. What we are lacking are consumers to come in and buy it."

Shimanski attributes this problem in part to the "convenience factor" of stopping at a chain grocery store, especially when the Minnesota weather is less than ideal for being outdoors.

He adds that while it may be easier to go to the grocery store, Minnesotans can support their local economy by buying food grown right in their own communities.

"We don't necessarily have to buy our fruits and vegetables from the West Coast or Central America or South America," he says. "I was in a grocery store last week and I saw fruit from South Africa on the shelf. How can that be practical to [ship] it from halfway around the world?"

Shimanski is working with his colleagues to find ways to better promote local produce. He points out that a public awareness campaign could help. Another solution, he says, might be a program that links local farmers with schools, hospitals and other institutions.

And the concept can be used for other food

products, too, such as those produced by the state's vegetable and meat processors.

Shimanski is working on legislation to create a new labeling program that would help consumers identify products on store shelves that were made or grown in Minnesota. Earlier this year, lawmakers directed the state Department of Agriculture to study the issue and provide policy recommendations for the possible creation of a new label.

Right now, the food industry can use all of the

One of the keys to increasing jobs and profitability for businesses in Minnesota is a reliable source of energy.

help it can get, Shimanski says. A wet summer has left soybean and grain production behind schedule. And concerns about the H1N1 virus (commonly referred to as the "swine flu") has negatively impacted pork exports throughout the world, despite the fact that the illness can't be transmitted through food products.

Helping the state's farmers is one of the many challenges that Shimanski and his colleagues will face when they return to St. Paul for the start of the 2010 legislative session.

Last month, he talked with CSG Midwest about these and other legislative priorities. Below are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: This year, state governments have been forced to make tough decisions about spending priorities. What discussions were you involved in this year?

A: I serve on the House Agriculture, Rural Economies and Veterans Affairs Committee. In our omnibus bill ... we cut out some non-essential programs, but at the same time, we wanted to make sure we take care of our veterans. So we were able to maintain our programs in veterans' services and actually add about \$4 million to our veterans' homes budget to help them offset rising pharmaceutical and energy costs. ...

We feel that we owe our veterans. They put their lives on the line for our security and our national interest. We did not want to shortchange them in any way.

Q: You serve on the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. What does that panel do?

A: We have the lottery proceeds that the state collects here in Minnesota that are divided up, and about 40 percent of the proceeds are put into a trust fund for Minnesota resources. The earnings off of that annually are distributed to groups that bring in proposals on efforts for clean water or prairie restoration, habitat improvement, environmental studies and so forth. ...

We are allocating about \$25 million through that commission this year. We have about \$86 million worth of requests. We had to whittle it down to what's practical and where we get the best value for our dollars. We have done the preliminary cuts and now are going to ... put it together in the form of a bill for the legislature to consider. ...

The commission does take reports and asks for results so we know that [the projects] are performing. We really have seen some neat things done.

Q: You have been a proponent of lifting Minnesota's ban on nuclear-power expansion. Why?

A: Minnesota is not an energy-rich state. We don't have natural gas or oil reserves, and we don't have coal fields. ...

There is a lot of talk here about renewable energy and clean energy. I think one of the primary considerations is that renewable energy is not dependable for baseload energy [in Minnesota]. ...

One of the keys to increasing jobs and profitability for businesses in Minnesota is a reliable source of energy. I think nuclear power has to be one of the primary considerations. In the last session, we heard talk about revitalizing the Iron Range in northeastern Minnesota, and the other minerals that are available there. But one of the things they are lacking is the power supply to process them. With an economical source of energy like nuclear power, we could be turning iron ore into steel bars right here in Minnesota.

Q: How would you like to see Minnesota rebound from the economic downturn?

A: My emphasis would be on reducing taxes and regulations. The cities that border Minnesota in Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota are fairly rich with jobs that used to be in Minnesota. ...

[For example], the other day I talked to a spice packager. He started in my district, and as he expanded, he moved to the St. Cloud area and eventually moved over to South Dakota because there was that much less regulation and business overhead. ... The state doesn't require as much in terms of permitting and inspections. ...

[My goal for next session] would probably be getting into the text of our statutes and taking out some of the onerous regulations that we do have here in Minnesota. Rather than pass more laws, I would like to look at what is holding us back. What do we already have in place that is holding us back economically? Let's remove some roadblocks and let's get on with the business of the good life in Minnesota.