

State Representative District 55A

LEON LILLIE

CAPITOL UPDATE



You Can Reach

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Constitutional Amendment to Dedicate Funding for Conservation

As you may know, yesterday the House passed a bill to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot in November that would dedicate three-sixteenths of the existing state sales tax towards conservation and arts programs. Under the proposal 60 percent of the revenues would go to fish and wildlife resources (\$81 million), 30 percent clean water (\$40.5 million), five percent parks and trails (\$6.75 million), and five percent arts and public broadcasting (\$6.75 million) starting in 2009.

Due to serious concerns over the way in which the House proposal was constructed I was unable to support the bill as it left the House, despite my support for additional dollars for these causes. This proposal's dedication of existing sales tax revenues worries me considerably because of its effects on the rest of the state budget. The money the bill would spend is already being used to fund other important state priorities like education and health care. Reserving these dollars for conservation and arts programs would take it away from and leave holes in other critical areas of the budget.

It is a concern that Dennis Anderson an outdoors columnist for the Star Tribune and a tremendous supporter over the years of dedicated conservation funding has echoed:

“That money generated by a conservation bill must be new money – we might as well finally say it – not money shifted from the general fund at the expense of other programs or constituencies. This, after all, is the straight-up way to do it: Give the electorate this fall a chance to vote whether they want to increase the sales tax...” ~ March 23, 2006

The next step for the legislation is conference committee to work out the differences between the Senate and House versions. Earlier this legislative session the Senate passed a bill that would ask voters to increase the state's sales tax three-eighths of a percent (\$270 million). Its proposal sends 34 percent of the revenues towards fish and wildlife resources, 22 percent parks and trails, 22 percent clean water, and 22 percent arts and humanities. Both sides will need to come to a compromise and ratify it before the issue can be placed on the ballot this fall.

The House's version of not using new money is a flaw that could even jeopardize its final passage by the voters this fall, if on the ballot. As Mr. Anderson



predicts many groups and their supporters would likely campaign against it because of the threat it poses to their interests and funding.

This is why during the debate on the issue I supported an amendment that would have taken the Senate's position, which if approved by the House would have guaranteed the dedicated conservation funding proposal's inclusion on the ballot. It had many advantages over the House's plan including no worries about the proposal possibly dying in conference committee; no waiting for money for these programs until 2009; and no possibility of creating holes in the rest of the state budget that could cause many groups to oppose it in the fall. Unfortunately the effort failed by only a couple of votes.

It is my sincere hope an agreement can be reached in conference committee that meets our state's conservation needs and alleviates my concerns with the House version. I would very much like for us to be able to enact legislation to help reverse the state's loss of valuable fish and wildlife habitat; restore and protect the water quality of our lakes, rivers and streams; and improve our outdoors recreational opportunities.



Rep. Leon Lillie with colleague Rep. Rick Hansen at the rally for ducks, wetlands and clean water on Saturday.

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