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BACKGROUND

Throughout the fall of 2005 several members of the grass roots natural resource community met to discuss how to improve communication between policy makers and constituents regarding issues of mutual concern. Several brainstorming sessions developed the framework for a one-day meeting called the Conservation Forum.

A steering committee of umbrella organizations was developed consisting of the IL Association of Park Districts, the IL Environmental Council and the IL Federation for Outdoor Resources. The steering committee invited members of conservation, recreation and environmental organizations to participate in the first ever Conservation Forum.

The forum was held at the University of IL in Springfield at the Public Affairs Center. Over 100 leaders of grass roots natural resource organizations met to discuss funding for natural resources, professional management of natural resource agencies, conservation education and advocacy. Recommendations were recorded and top priorities were identified. The Conservation Forum Report contains the products developed during the Conservation Forum.

The steering committee will discuss the top priorities of the Conservation Forum with candidates for political offices, including governor and lt. governor. It is the intent of these discussions that some or all of the priorities be adopted in the candidate’s campaign platforms and initiated as policy upon their election to office.
REGISTERED ORGANIZATIONS

Adams Co. Farm Bureau
Addison Park District
Batchtown Sportsman's Club
Bensenville Park District
Blackhawk Field Archers
Blue River Outdoors
Champaign Co Forest Preserve District
Crab Orchard Waterfowl Assn.
Decatur Audubon Society
Ducks Unlimited
Field Trial Clubs of IL
Forest Preserve District of DuPage County
Forest Preserve District of Will County
Franklin Creek Preservation Area Cmte.
Friends of Sanganois
Fur Takers of America
Genoa Park District
Glenview Park Dist
Harvey Park District
Hoffman Estates Park District
IL Assoc. of Park Districts
IL Assoc. of Regional Councils
IL Audubon Society
IL Bow Hunters Society
IL Chapter, Sierra Club
IL Conservation Foundation
IL Environmental Council
IL Farm Bureau
IL Federation for Outdoor Resources
IL Federation Of Hunting Dogs
IL Muskie Tournament Trail NFP
IL Recreational Resources Organization
IL Stewardship Alliance
IL Taxidermist Association
IL Trail Riders
IL Trappers Association
IL Wood Products Assoc.

Lake Co. Forest Preserve District
Lan-Oak Park Dist
League of IL Bicyclists
Macon County Conservation District
Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation
McClure Communications
McHenry County Conservation District
Medinah Park District
Naperville Park District
National Trappers Association
National Wild Turkey Federation
Natural Land Institute
Northbrook Park District
Office of Recreation & Parks
Open Lands Project
Palatine Park District
Park District of Franklin Park
Park District of Highland Park
Pheasants Forever
Pike Co Farm Bureau
Quad City Conservation Alliance
Quail Forever
Rock Island Park & Recreation Dept.
Rockford Park District
Rocky Mt.Elk Foundation
Schaumburg Park District
Shawnee Group Sierra Club
Shawnee Trail Conservancy
St. Charles Park District
The Nature Conservancy
Trees Forever
Tri-County Regional Planning Commission
United Bow Hunters of Illinois
Urbana Park District
Walnut Knob Outdoors, Inc.
Wheeling Park District
Winnebago Co. Forest Preserve District
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FUNDING FOR NATURAL RESOURCES

Funding issues permeated all the discussions in the Conservation Forum breakout groups and were identified as the highest priority for the future. Considerable concern was expressed on the need to increase annual funding for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ operations to insure proper stewardship of our natural resources and conservation. Forum participants urged that dedicated funds be exempt from budgetary sweeps, and urged the repeal of legislation authorizing such action. Sustaining the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant funds and the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF) program was enthusiastically supported. The concept of expanding these successful and highly regarded programs based on actual annual revenues received in the Real Estate Transfer Fund was strongly endorsed. The Open Land Trust and C 2000 program funds and the endowment fund established for conservation purposes should be maintained and increased. Based on increased urban sprawl, Illinois was encouraged to prioritize funds for more land acquisition, trail development, and incentives for conservation practices on private lands. Initiatives with private landowners should result in more recreational opportunities as well as provide for the protection of Illinois’ natural resources and wildlife habitat.

Conservation Forum delegates offered numerous suggestions on ways to achieve more additive funding, including these in particular: dedicating a percentage of Illinois’ Sales Tax for natural resources; promoting voluntary and incentive based private lands initiatives; earmarking 10% of unallocated real estate transfer tax funds for the state’s match of federal scenic and conservation easement purchases; allow more flexibility in how Illinois dollars are spent to attain conservation goals beyond fee simple acquisition, especially thru conservation easements and land trusts. Illinois should initiate a sales tax referendum that identifies a percentage of newly derived funds for natural resources and conservation purposes. 1/8 of 1 percent of the Illinois Sales Tax is the most commonly offered proposal. New dollars generated from this source would be in addition to other required General Revenue Funds to support IDNR’s annual operational demands. Other options should also be explored to address budgetary requirements for natural resources and conservation.

Considerable discussion occurred on the advantages and benefits of an independent commission to oversee and manage Illinois’ natural resources programs and funds. Such an approach is believed most beneficial to protecting dedicated funding earmarked for conservation initiatives, habitat restoration and protection, open space land acquisition and development, wildlife and natural areas preservation, and other major undertakings.
PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
Professional management of natural resources is a high priority for constituents. Achieving this objective can be done in a variety of ways. The constituents in the Conservation Forum recommend two primary methods of striving for professional management of natural resources: 1) forming a commission style of government; and 2) hiring qualified individuals with science based conservation experience to meet adequate staffing levels.

1). Constituents recommend that an independent commission be formed that is responsible for hiring professional managers to provide qualified leadership for IDNR. The commissioners should be highly qualified individuals with diverse backgrounds that represent all of IDNR’s fields of discipline. Commissioners can be nominated and appointed by various means (by governors, legislators, grass roots organizations etc as defined by legislation enacting the commission). Most people seek to maintain employment that is long term and performance based. Illinois’ system of short term appointments for upper management level positions discourages some qualified professionals from accepting jobs that do not offer this incentive. Therefore Illinois loses out on a pool of the best and brightest minds in the scientific community. A commission form of government could eliminate the term appointment system of turnover and

2). Constituents recommend restoring full staffing of natural resource divisions at IDNR, EPA, DOA and Extension by way of aggressive recruitment and retention of qualified professionals. Constituents recommend establishment of higher hiring standards for IDNR managers that ensures they meet criteria that are science based. For many years the IL Department of Natural Resources was known across the country for being managed by well-qualified, highly respected, trained professionals with science based education and experience. In recent years the constituents have complained that these professionals were replaced with less qualified political appointees, thereby diminishing the reputation of IDNR. Constituents do not want the IDNR run by appointed puppets that spend time praising the actions of political candidates. Illinois’ current system has loop holes that allow the hiring of politically connected individuals who barely meet minimum qualifications.

CONSERVATION EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

ADVOCACY
The Conservation Congress was an unprecedented constituent outreach program involving citizens in government decision making. It was the largest and most influential advisory body of “stakeholders” representing organized groups committed to the protection, conservation, sustainable use and recreational enjoyment of Illinois’ natural resources. Several other states sent representatives to observe and study the Conservation Congress. The program generated so much interest and praise that its managers were invited to present a seminar at the International Association of Public Participation Conference in Arizona.
The program brought a diverse constituency together to develop consensus on a broad range of topics. Recommendations that resulted from or were supported by the Conservation Congress include establishment of the IL Conservation Foundation, the Environmental License Plates, Conservation 2000, ENTICE and many other programs. The last assembly of Conservation Congress was held, with modifications, in January of 2004. The modified assembly proved that the program could be continued on a greatly reduced budget with minimal staff. However, the current administration discontinued the program citing budget and staffing reductions.

Constituents at the Conservation Forum believe that an advocacy program is strongly needed. As a result they have recommended the following: 1) Develop an advocacy coalition for conservation/outdoor recreation issues, 2) Establishment of an IL independent Conservation Congress and 3) Create a private sector led cooperative umbrella or Forum to develop a public relations plan that includes marketing, speakers bureau, lobbyist and political action committee in order to assure an environmentally literate populace.

EDUCATION
In 1957 an unfunded mandate was passed requiring conservation education be taught in Illinois schools. This mandate is still unmet, yet conservation education remains a high priority for constituents. Every assembly of Conservation Congress has passed education recommendations. Among those were support and expansion of the ENTICE program (Environment and Nature Training Institute for Conservation Education) and EL for IL (Environmental Literacy for Illinois). Once again the constituents prove that conservation education is a high priority by recommending the following at the Conservation Forum: 1) Establish a robust, statewide, formal and non-formal, natural resource and conservation education program for the state of IL. (All the above should be driven by the best science and be ongoing and regular).
TOP PRIORITIES OF THE 2006 CONSERVATION FORUM

GROUP ONE
· Protect dedicated funding programs and resources; create separate funding sources, both managed by an independent commission.
· Establish an independent commission that hires professional management who provides qualified leadership for DNR.
· Establishment of an IL independent Conservation Congress.
· Establish a robust, statewide, formal and non-formal, natural resource and conservation education program for the state of IL. (All the above should be driven by the best science and be ongoing and regular).

GROUP TWO
· Increase funding with oversight to keep dedicated funds for statutory purposes (with full appropriations and funding for OSLAD? NAAF and full appropriations and funding for federal LAWCON and transportation enhancement).
· Designate 1/8 of 1% Illinois sales tax for DNR funding.
· Restore full staffing of natural resources divisions at DNR, EPA, DOA and Extension by way of aggressive recruitment and retention of qualified professionals.
· Support of private lands cooperative initiative and programs with voluntary incentive based conservation programs for private property landowners.
· Create a private sector led cooperative umbrella or Forum to develop a public relations plan that includes marketing, speakers bureau, lobbyist and political action committee in order to assure an environmentally literate populace.
· To encourage a public land usage initiative to consider site specific plans for all forms of outdoor recreation and management purposes.

GROUP THREE
· No sweep of dedicated funds. Repeal current legislation.
· Refill/fill DNR positions. They must have a conservation background (including the Director).
· Preserve/utilize/increase funding for OSLAD/NAAF/C2000. Maximize federal matching dollars.

GROUP FOUR
· Develop an advocacy coalition for conservation/outdoor recreation issues.
· Increase funding for DNR operations.
· Hire a DNR director who meets an established set of qualifications.
BREAK OUT GROUP FLIP CHART NOTES (combined in no priority order)

FUNDING

- Continue/expand OSLAD funding
- Increase funding IDNR operations
- Protect funds from sweeps
- 1/8 of 1% state sales tax funding for operation of IDNR or explore other options
- Repeal legislation that authorizes Bureau of Budget to sweep dedicated funds
- Continue to fund C2000 Program
- Endowment for conservation purposes (habitat, unique sites, etc.)
- Continue and increase OSLAD, funding for NAAF and LAWCON
- Tie funding to population (criteria for grants) introduce children; minorities included
- Continue and increase Open land Trust
- Create green infrastructure program for state of Illinois (connectivity of spaces reduce fragmentation) watersheds, corridors etc.
- We need to focus and increase funding for land acquisition
- Dedicated percent of sales tax to natural resources
- Promote voluntary and incentive based private land initiatives
- 10% of unallocated real estate transfer tax for state share of federal scenic and conservation easement purchases
- Restore funding for matching federal grants (wildlife fund, WRD) ensure matching operational funds included
- IDOT trail funding
- Flexibility in how IL $ spent to attain conservation goals beyond fee acquisition
- Long range plan to fund state’s share of Corps plan on IL river watershed
- No sweep of dedicated funds (repeal legislation)
- Preserve & utilize OSLAD & NAAF, C2000 funding
- Preserve/increase/utilize funding for OSLAD/NAAF/C2000 & federal/state matching programs
- Protect existing dedicated funding programs and sources, create separate funding sources, both managed by an independent commission
- Leave dedicated program funds alone
- Need a conservation commission
- Sales tax referendum
· GRF support for DNR (enhanced)
· TEALEU wasn’t appropriated so could rescind $30 million
· Dedicated funding for independent commission
· Relief from tax cap for conservation
· Help conservation organizations with health insurance
· Stop “sweeps”
· Formula for economically challenged communities (hard to come up with match)
· Appropriate standing balances in dedicated funds
· Different formula doesn’t look at per capita
· More funding for local planning strategic and comprehensive long range plans
· Increase funding for trail use
· Increase funding for conservation of natural resources on private lands
· Look at tax laws and other ways for incentives to private landowners to open land to public and for natural resources management

PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

· Science should dictate policy
· Work with utility companies on providing more open space
· Address liability concerns
· Long term interdisciplinary vision, science to drive vision/plan
· Develop natural resources commission that insulates environmental & recreation policies from “politics”
· Hire a qualified leader (set of qualifications)
· Field and natural history biologists – fill all positions, rehire key staff
· Integrated biology/regional teams
· Financial report card
· Director of DNR, all biologists, all managers have professional conservation background
· Reconvene Conservation Congress
· Develop best management practices (ie. prairie burns)
· Conservation Forum every year to refocus legislators
· Fill all positions with qualified staff, conservation experience, including director, managers with biology experience
• Professional leadership and management of DNR
• An independent commission that hires professional management and provides qualified leadership for DNR
• Independent commission of natural resource professionals
• Professional management, professional director of DNR (help DNR image)
• Professional management at all levels
• Need to put biologists back in the field, maintain a base level of professional managers
• Private landowners will only trust professional managers
• Protect funding
• Off-track $ should go directly to park districts
• Quicker reimbursements on grants and support
• Tell the economic “good news” about natural resource programs
• Natural resources should get its “fair share” of available revenue rather than a disproportionate target

CONSERVATION EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

• Establishment of independent Conservation Congress
• Establish a robust, statewide, formal and non-formal natural resources and conservation education program for the state of Illinois
• All four priorities grounded in the best science ongoing
• Develop an independent advocacy coalition for conservation and outreach issues
• Create more grassroots awareness of public policy, conservation/environmental issues
• Develop and support environmental education programs and materials
• Educate elected officials on role and capabilities of IDNR
• Conservation response to urban sprawl must have green-space component
• Bring back DNR education program – almost gone (transportation, teacher training, etc. all gone)
• Environmental education center (maybe Wildlife Prairie Park)
• More regional education coordinators add bow hunting
• Natural resource advocates must stop being point of least resistance
• Recruit all inclusive outdoor activities to children that aren’t exposed to conservation, recreation heritage (out-reach)
· Financial report card
· Outreach to minorities and children
· Encourage “green” architecture
· Balance consumptive uses of resources are important part of education (public ed/advocacy) “balance of nature”
· Public support is required for N. R. (public must push for action) lobby efforts, private to general assembly coordinated lobby efforts
· State coordination of volunteer programs (certification)
· Re-instate eco-watch program
· Re-instate protection for landowner liability
· Resolve the assessment of property taxes on woodlands and wildlands
· Communication and support of DNR
· Develop environmental ethics programming for K – 20 (ENTICE reinvigorated)
· Process within DNR for legislation (game commission)
· Unite constituencies
· Bring back Conservation Congress
· Help local environmental educators get into schools (more partnerships public and private)
· Maintain parks and zoos (Cons. facilities for our kids)
· Educate landowners on economic benefits of natural resource management
· Encourage and expand local field days for students (natural resource/outdoor education)
· Experience of wild places is an essential part of education of natural resources
· Utilize programs we have to protect natural areas
· Educate general public about why services are no longer available and what is happening with funding
· Work together as a collective organization for the common mission of better educating conservation for investing in our natural resources
· It is about power and politics

Today is a monumental occasion for Illinois’ natural resources, parks, recreation and conservation. Sponsored by the Steering Committee, we have assembled in this auditorium the leadership of a broad based coalition of organizations concerned with conservation, recreation and environmental issues in our State.

You came here today, on your own time, at your own expense, traveling great distances, to represent your organization and to share your views and ideas on major issues of common concern. Most of you have had a life-long commitment to protecting our natural resources, preserving our wildlife habitat, participating in varied outdoor recreational pursuits, and dedicating countless hours to your organization in the interest of protecting our natural world.

Illinois is a great state and offers much natural resource diversity as well as opportunity to enjoy the great outdoors. And while we may not compare with some other nearby states in acres per capita of public land, we have all continued to encourage government, at all levels, to acquire significant parcels of land with natural resource value.

We also have learned the hard lesson in Illinois that government, state and local, cannot achieve the goal of being responsible stewards of public land without the support of private landowners. We have long recognized the value and benefit of partnerships with corporations and the business community to address long-term goals of balancing economic development while protecting natural resources.

In order for government to pursue its legislative mandates, adequate resources must be available. This requires appropriate levels of funds for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. Additionally, State government must take steps to insure dedicated revenues remain earmarked for statutorily designated programs.

State government through grants and technical assistance can partner with local government and the private sector to provide land, programs and services demanded by the public. The leadership to manage Illinois’ natural resources and conservation
programs requires experience and formal educational training. Decisions affecting our natural resources must be based on science, not political expediency.

Our children and grandchildren need to be well-versed in conservation education to appreciate the wonders of nature. We need to work towards a stronger outdoor ethic and a rededication to educating Illinois youth on the importance of our natural resources.

Today you will have the unique opportunity, in your assigned breakout groups, of sharing your views and ideas regarding all of the above and specifically: advocacy, conservation education, professional management, and funding for natural resources.

We will reconvene in this room later this afternoon to review the work products from each breakout group and attempt to achieve consensus on ways and means to address the four primary topics. Eventually, our views and suggestions will be presented to the candidates for Governor in the hope that they will further consider our proposals in their platforms.

The people that are assembled here today know better than almost anyone else that the Illinois Department of Natural Resources is on a life support system. We read about budget cuts year after year after year and how no services are being harmed — and we say, “Who is kidding who!”

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees issued a report that examines budget and staff trimming at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency since 2001. The report’s title is “On Shaky Ground: Illinois Environmental Protection and Conservation at Risk.” The 19-page report concluded the half-decade of cuts have “undermined” the two agencies and DNR’s 30% cutback has “harmed” the body’s efforts to preserve and conserve natural resources. You can’t balance the state budget on the back of an agency whose budget is less than 1% of the general revenue.

There is ample evidence that state parks and natural habitats are being neglected. Public water supplies are not being adequately safeguarded. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees’ report stated that DNR is operating with 6 fewer staffed forestry districts than it was in 2001, and only 13 state parks have interpreters for education programs, compared to 24 in the year 2000. Fish biologists have been cut from 29 to 18. The backlog for receiving a boating license can reach 5 months, according to the report.

Recently, there has been conversation to raid the Habitat Fund and shift the money into state general revenue efforts. As you know, the Habitat Fund was created in 1992. Hunters are conservationists who willingly paid $5.50 for a stamp, with the proceeds designated for spending on wildlife habitat and outdoor purposes. Those are
dedicated funds. As recently as last year, DNR awarded a quarter of a million dollars from the Habitat Fund to 25 projects. Using that money for other programs is reneging on the arrangement hunters agreed to originally.

In addition, there have been attempts to “put on vacation” or sweep the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development fund that we created in the 1980s. This is our attempt to stay even with urban sprawl and to protect parks and natural resources.

Fellow colleagues, the time has come for us to speak out and speak up for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Problems will be solved when we re-establish our identity, our pride, and our determination to affect the political system. We must raise, not lower, our expectations... raise, not lower, our determination to succeed. Time is of essence.

Legislative advocacy is the motivating force of democracy. Our collective goals will be achieved not by avoiding it, but by embracing all the many aspects of political advocacy. We CAN create our own future. What will that future be?

How do I describe our situation today for conservation groups throughout the State of Illinois? I describe our situation by using the words of the famous patriot, Patrick Henry, who once said, “If we don’t hang together, we most assuredly will hang separately.”

Thank you for coming today and for your continued commitment to conservation, recreation and our priceless natural resources.
REMARKS BY MARC MILLER, SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR FOR LT. GOV. PAT QUINN

My name is Marc Miller and I am a senior policy advisor for Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn. My primary responsibilities are rivers, conservation, environment, natural resources, nature-based tourism, and outdoor recreation.

Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn has been a champion for conservation issues, and has a long list of accomplishments as Lt. Governor. Many of these are a result as his responsibilities as the Chairman of the Illinois River Coordinating Council and the Chair of the Illinois delegation to the Great Lakes Commission.

But these alone do not explain the totality of these accomplishments. Pat Quinn has a personal interest in the environment and ensuring that future generations can enjoy much of the nature’s bounty, if not in a better state, than we can today. Clean water and air are important to our health and well-being, as well as to our economy and future of our communities. Healthy wildlife populations and our encounters with them not only help sustain us and improve our quality of life, but also provide an important economic input into Illinois’ economy.

According to a US Fish and Wildlife Service survey in 2001, wildlife-related activities – fishing, hunting, and wildlife-viewing – contributed $4 billion dollars in Illinois’ economy. This input helps to create 42,000 jobs and generate $315 million in state and local tax revenues. Under the Illinois Constitution, each Illinois citizen is guaranteed the right to a healthy environment. Today’s citizens are to expect this, and so will future generations.

To accomplish these guarantees and objectives takes creative solutions. Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn has worked to implement and sustain many such initiatives to better our natural resources, our environment.

Here are some of the accomplishments of the Lt. Governor:

**Rivers**

- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for the Illinois River watershed – helping to secure $20 million in state funds to leverage $80 million federal dollars that will restore over 40,000 acres to conservation cover through this voluntary, incentive-based program;
- Plum Island protecting from developers and saving eagle nesting habitat next to Starved Rock State Park;
- Mud to Park – a beneficial river sediment reuse project – which restores deep water fish habitat in the Illinois River and backwater lakes while creating an upland benefit for parks and natural areas. Quinn’s work benefited the restoration of the US Steel Southworks site on the Lake Michigan Shoreline;
- Created other opportunities for Mud to Parks Initiative through settlements that will benefit Rice and Pekin Lakes and provide testing for additional projects;
Working with the State of Louisiana to explore barging river sediment to Louisiana to help restore coastal wetlands and protect that state from future hurricane storm surges;
- Provided funding for the RiverWatch program – where citizen scientists sample streams to determine ecological health;
- Spoon River Streambank Stabilization Initiative – targeting an underserved watershed with programming to address erosion and sedimentation;
- Banner Natural Areas – protecting floodplain habitat from inappropriate development. This area is surrounded on two sides by DNR areas;
- Securing National Scenic By-way designation for Illinois River Country roadways, encouraging nature-based tourism;
- Met with municipal leaders to discuss dam safety and river restoration opportunities associated with dam removal;
- Co-sponsored three annual Chicago River Summits and pushed for the river to meet fishable and swimmable goals under the Clean Water Act;
- Provided grants to Friends of the Chicago River, Fox River, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Southeast Environmental Task Force, and Heartland Waterways Council for their environmental work; and,
- Passage of new legislation to create the Mississippi River Coordinating Council.

**Great Lakes Commission**
- Forwarded the Coastal Zone Management application so that Illinois could be eligible for millions of dollars of restoration aid;
- Worked for funding of restoration of Hegewish Marsh and create more open space in the Calumet River watershed;
- Working to fund the completion and operation of a permanent asian carp barrier; and,
- Working with DCEO and other entities to create markets for asian carp and reduce their numbers in the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers.

**Green Infrastructure**
- Green infrastructure are structural elements and best management practices to reduce energy impacts in developments, improve stormwater quality and reduce flooding incidents. Foremost among Lt. Governor’s green infrastructure accomplishments is the Rain Garden Initiative;
- The Rain Garden Initiative has granted funding to schools to create rain gardens to reduce impacts from storm runoff, allowing educational opportunities and for native plants and habitat; and,
- Promoted a model stream buffer ordinance in Peoria and other communities to reduce impacts of stormwater runoff, erosion, and other factors

Many here in this room have worked with our office to address many of your concerns. We look forward to working with you, and encourage others to contact us. If there is anything the Lt. Governor or his staff can do to assist you, please contact us. Thank you.
REMARKS BY JUDY BAAR TOPINKA,  
REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE FOR GOVERNOR

Thank you for your invitation to join with you today.

I want thank Jonathan Goldman for his introduction and express my thanks to the Illinois Environmental Council for co-hosting this forum. I also wish to recognize Bob Becker and IFOR and Ted Flickinger and the Association of Illinois Park Districts for co-hosting.

I appreciate all of their good work organizing today’s Conservation Forum.

Let me also say thanks to all of you here today for taking off a Saturday to work to improve our natural resources.

It is unfortunate the current governor does not care enough about your issues to be here today.

Even worse than his absence and his indifference, is the harm Rod Blagojevich has caused to conservation interests.

Gov. Blagojevich demonstrated his indifference when he canceled Conservation Congress and made it necessary to hold today’s Forum.

Next year, I will announce that the Illinois Department of Natural Resources will once again partner with you in holding the 6th Conservation Congress.

It’s not always easy in Springfield to find a place large enough to host Conservation Congress, but you know, there is a shiny new DNR building on the north side of the Fair Grounds. It’s not being put to much use, and, if you’d like, I could make it available to host the next Conservation Congress.

What do you think?

I care about your issues, and I thank you for your good work. Unlike Governor Blagojevich, I will never treat conservation, open space and outdoor recreation as luxuries, rather than essentials.

We all recognize that great communities value good schools and libraries. They value safe roads and bridges, as well as good doctors and modern medical facilities.

But great communities also recognize the importance of outdoor recreation and open space. People want a high “quality of life”, and they understand outdoor recreational opportunities are critical.

Illinois citizens value the great outdoors and they want expanded opportunities to hunt and fish, to bird watch, to hike in the woods or walk on the Rock Island Trail, to bicycle on the Vadalabene Trail, to ride horses at Jim Edgar Panther Creek, to launch a canoe on the Cache River or to take their family to one of our many state parks for a family camping trip.

Illinois has great resources from Illinois Beach State Park to Pere Marquette, from Apple River Canyon to Starved Rock and from White Pines to Giant City.
We have bountiful resources and this state’s governor is responsible for ensuring that the Illinois Department of Natural Resources serves as a wise and capable steward of these resources.

I have a reputation for speaking bluntly and today will be no exception. I am going to tell the truth about this governor and I will pull no punches.

Today I am here to say Rod Blagojevich has failed in this very important responsibility. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has been decimated, and morale in the agency has NEVER been lower.

Professionals with twenty and thirty years of experience have been laid off, let go, demoted or fired. Other professionals are fleeing the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to find work in states where their talents and commitment will be respected.

These professionals are being replaced by inexperienced people, with no training or education in natural resource disciplines. DNR has become the dumping ground for campaign contributors, political bosses, bar owners, and even a TV weatherman.

The governor’s actions are disgraceful, and he should be held accountable in this election. This is not what he promised you four years ago.

In 2002, the Illinois Association of Park Districts asked candidate Rod Blagojevich if he would hire a natural resources professional to run the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. His answer then was “Yes”.

Did he honor that promise?

Well, first you got a legislator with no natural resource training to serve as the DNR Director. He left and it got worse. Rod Blagojevich’s Acting Director also has no natural resource training. What are the qualifications of the man in charge of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources? He is a Democratic Party State Central Committeeman.

Rod Blagojevich has now had two directors and appointed six Deputy or Assistant Directors in the top DNR positions. None of them has a degree in the natural resources.

In terms of appointments and professional staffing, the governor is guilty of incompetence. In terms of finance, Rod Blagojevich is guilty of negligence.

Here are three statistics that say a lot about this governor’s attitude toward you and conservation:

- 33% - That is how much he has cut the Department of Natural Resources Budget since he took office three years ago.
- 431 – The number of jobs the Blagojevich Administration has eliminated in the Department of Natural Resources.
- Nearly $60 million – The amount of money Governor Blagojevich has swept from funds intended for habitat, open space, natural areas, trails, and state parks.
Actions have repercussions. When the DNR loses 431 positions it means state parks are operating without park managers and garbage doesn’t get picked up on a regular basis. When you don’t have personnel to work with private landowners, the department will be unable to increase access for hunting or fishing.

When you cut the department’s budget by one-third, it should not be a surprise that phones ring off the hook and there are too few staff to respond to people’s needs. Insufficient attention and misplaced priorities have hurt our state parks. Park roads and buildings are falling apart as maintenance needs are ignored.

When your attitude is that conservation is a luxury, it results in the under funding of CREP, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and not leveraging state dollars to attract more federal funds for the Illinois River.

When you cut the Department’s budget by 33% and decimate its staff, it also explains why the new DNR building resembles a Ghost Town.

Worst of all, when you under fund the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and fire quality staff, you lose the respect of state conservationists and professionals throughout the nation.

Governor Blagojevich and I have butted heads on the issue of fund sweeps. I believe he has overstepped his authority, taking money from designated programs and paying for pet projects, such as power-washing salt domes and heating the driveway at the Governor’s mansion.

The governor has taken nearly $60 million from natural resource-related funds. These cuts have been devastating. A few examples:

- The State Parks Fund - $5 Million Swept
- State Boating Act – Nearly $9 Million
- Natural Areas Acquisition - $5 Million
- OSLAD (Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Fund) – $13 Million
- Illinois Habitat Endowment - $3.6 Million
- Conservation 2000 – $8.6 Million Swept
- Illinois Forestry Development - $3.1 Mil.
- Parks and Conservation – $11 Million

Governor Blagojevich swept all of these dollars, but thanks to your good work, he was stopped from taking even more conservation funds. Two years ago, the governor wanted to take a “vacation” from conservation programs and steal $35 million from natural resource funds. All of you formed a strong partnership and stopped the governor’s ill-advised effort.

If I am elected your governor, I can tell you one thing right now. When it comes to spending for open space, conservation, and outdoor recreation, you will never hear a Governor Topinka utter the words, “Take a Holiday”.

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Instead, in November we should tell Rod Blagojevich to “Take a Holiday.” A very, very long Holiday.

A Governor must lead and Rod Blagojevich has failed to lead on conservation issues. When you fail to lead, problems go unsolved, and opportunities are squandered.

For years, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources was a leader. Illinois professionals were respected throughout the country and led on regional and national issues.

Today, the department cannot find money to send professionals to critical regional workshops and national policy meetings. That contrasts with their ability to pay for 8 front office staff to visit Las Vegas.

Consider this contrast: Five years ago, the then Director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources was chairing the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The only thing the current director may be chairing is a fundraiser for Rod Blagojevich.

Let me describe two examples of how a lack of leadership creates problems.

Until recently, landowners who allowed visitors on their property for recreational purposes did so without fear of liability. The protection was lost, so last year legislation was needed to reestablish liability protection.

Because neither the governor nor DNR took charge, a bill was written and influenced not by the DNR, but by the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association. It provided some protection but not for most types of recreation like fishing, boating, hiking, birding, bicycling, and horseback riding.

The DNR should have led – They did not. The governor should have led – He did not.

Then there is the debacle involving Forest Land Tax Assessment. Even though this issue had been brewing for years, DNR and the governor did nothing.

County Assessors started sending new assessments to forest property owners and their taxes were about to soar. Typically, tax bills were rising SIX-FOLD. In other cases, the new tax bills were even more staggering. Tragically, some people are unable to pay these higher taxes and have threatened to rip out forests.

Because the governor did nothing, legislators stepped in, created a task force and enacted a two year moratorium on forest reassessments.

Here is my question: Why didn’t the governor or his DNR do this two years ago?

The governor’s lack of leadership has also squandered opportunities. Thousands of acres of private land could be accessed by Illinois sportsmen, if only the DNR would act. If the governor would act, we could enroll more landowners in the conservation reserve enhancement program.
The governor has lost another opportunity by failing to include money in the budget for conducting a new Natural Areas Inventory.

We have not done a comprehensive inventory since 1978 and the money is sitting unused in the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund. Three not-for-profit groups are ready to contribute $2 million to get this done and we should act NOW.

I am not here just to criticize the governor. I came to tell you my vision of conservation and the role of the Dept. of Natural Resources.

Illinois faces huge challenges. Many affect our natural resources and how we can protect and best utilize them. Illinois will have to focus on water issues that deal with both quantity and quality. We will need to address concerns about Sprawl, not just in northeastern Illinois, but throughout the state. And let’s not forget we have invasive species, threats to biodiversity and global warming.

I don’t have all of the answers, but I want a Department of Natural Resources that can help us develop solutions.

That is why my first pledge to you is that I will rebuild the DNR into a department that will be respected throughout the country. I will hire a natural resources professional to run the Department and my top managers will be natural resource professionals. To rebuild the Department, we will need your help, but I promise it will be a professional agency again.

My second pledge to you is that we will stop the Blagojevich raids on special funds.

OSLAD funds should and will go for open space. Natural Areas dollars will be spent to buy and protect precious parcels of native Illinois. Habitat money will be spent on habitat, not the governor’s pet projects. Boating money and Parks money will be spent for their intended purposes – not be swept into the State General Revenue Fund.

My third commitment is that natural resource policy will be guided by science not politics. We must recruit the best biologists and natural resource specialists to help us set good policy.

Illinois has three great Scientific Surveys and the Illinois State Museum. They have some of the state’s brightest and most committed scientists. We should respect their scientific work because good science and accurate data are important to decision making.

My fourth promise is that we will focus greater attention on our state parks and recreational areas and not let them fall into disrepair. With millions of Illinois citizens and tourists from the rest of the country using our facilities, we must invest in our parks.

My fifth promise is that we will expand access to recreational opportunities. Today, there is more demand than there is opportunity. We must commit staff to work with private and corporate landowners.

Expanding recreational opportunities will be a top priority of the Topinka Administration.
Let me close with a final thought about my vision of the Department of Natural Resources.

I am a big believer in communication.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources will have an open door and my Director will reach out to all natural resource constituencies. It will be an ongoing dialogue, not a lecture. We may not always agree, but you will be involved and your opinions will be sought.

We are most effective when we work together. Natural resources should be the perfect area for partnerships because there are so many opportunities to leverage state, local, federal and not-for-profit money. We will reach out and we will listen.

We will reinstitute Conservation Congress and seek your advice on how to make Illinois great again.

Throughout my time in public service, I have always believed government works best when citizens are involved and given a voice.

I am here today to ask for your support, but I am also asking for your help as we return natural resources to its proper position.

Join with me and I believe we can and we will make history. Thank you.
CLOSING REMARKS BY BRENT MANNING, IFOR LIFE MEMBER

As many of you are probably aware, I have been a Life Member of IFOR since very early in its existence. Bob Becker and Miles Bruekner visited me in the old Department of Conservation headquarters on 2nd Street and promised “this won’t hurt a bit”. Since those early days, I have been proud to have been associated with them. Bob asked that I represent IFOR in providing these closing remarks.

This has been a tough year for our natural resources. Two of our strongest advocates, actually, legends, in the natural resource arena have passed. One went to a place where the mallards always fly and the sky is adorned with glorious sights and sounds of waterfowl. The other went home where the beaver and mink as Jim Bridger once said “outnumber the stars in the sky”.

Miles Bruekner and Trapper Joe Kelley passed this last year. Why would I say they are legends? Because they cared enough to continue to fight the good fight up until the last minute. They did not negotiate their principles. They were not Republican or Democrat based on who was in office. They were our champions of our natural resources and the devil be damned as to whose toes they stepped on!

Do we have legends today in Illinois? Is there someone remaining among us who still fight the good fights?

Yes – who are they? Look around you.

Ted Flickinger – I am sure your life would be a whole lot easier if you didn’t have to give up your Saturday to fight for this cause of course with Ted comes John Comerio and Peter Murphy, two of the best.

Bob Becker – day in and day out, you have been a friend of our resources for as long as I have known you and with Bob comes Brenda Potts.

There are others:

Carl Becker – is one of the best Natural Resource professionals I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

Jerry Beverlin – who is with his grandson in Disney World today, is another.

They care and continue to try and make a difference.

John Schmitt, Brian Anderson, and the list goes on and on.

What can you do? Get active, get involved and stay involved. If you care, apathy is not an option!

In 1787, about the time our original 13 states adopted their new constitution, Alexander Tyler, a Scottish history professor at the University of Edinburgh, had this to say about the fall of the Athenian Republic some 2,000 years prior:

“A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government … every democracy will finally collapse”.

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From the beginning of history, the average age of the world’s greatest civilizations has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, the nations always progressed through the following sequence:

1. From bondage to spiritual faith;
2. From spiritual faith to great courage;
3. From courage to liberty;
4. From liberty to abundance;
5. From abundance to complacency;
6. From complacency to apathy;
7. From apathy to dependence;
8. From dependence back into bondage”.

Some believe the United States is now somewhere between the “complacency and apathy” phase of Professor Tyler’s definition of democracy, with some 40% of the nation’s population already having reached the “governmental dependency” phase. In the middle of the last century, people in Europe became apathetic and a vocal minority took over in Germany. Nazi Germany had overrun almost all of Europe and hammered England to the verge of bankruptcy and defeat after sinking more than 400 British ships in the convoys between England and America for food and war materials.

Had Hitler not made a grave tactical error when he invaded England in the Battle of Britain on August 13, 1940, there would have been no England for the US and the Brits to use as a staging ground to prepare an assault on Nazi Europe. England would not have been able to run its North African campaign to help take a little pressure off Russia, while America geared up for battle and, today, Europe would very probably be run by the Nazis of the Third Reich. But the Brits were not complacent.

I say this to illustrate that turning points in history are often very dicey things AND many of those turning points are brought on by being apathetic and complacent.

Americans have a short attention span. I suppose this is due, in large part, to our viewing 60 minute TV shows and 2 hour movies in which everything comes out “ok” in the end. The real world is not like that. It is messy, uncertain and, sometimes, bloody and ugly. Always has been and, probably, always will be.

According to the Illinois State Board of Elections:

- The number of registered voters in the State of Illinois as of the 2004 general election was 7,499,488.
- 71.34 percent of registered voters voted in that election. (It was a presidential election) or 5,350,135 people.
- The estimate for this past primary is only 20% of the registered voters participating or 1,874,872 people.
- Natural Resource constituents that you represent number 3-4 million people.

According to the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, in order to prevent multiple voting, the index finger of each voter was dipped in indelible ink. Upon entering the
polling station, each voter’s finger was checked for the presence of this ink. Many Iraqis gave their lives for the privilege of participating for the first time in a Democracy. Insurgents killed as many as these brave people that were so marked by this indelible ink.

Now is the time to become legends. Exercise your right to vote. If my calculations are correct, Natural Resource constituents conservatively represent 3-4 million voters in the State of Illinois. If you don’t vote, the results are your responsibility.

You know, I have thought a lot about how to honor Mike and Joe. A moment of silence? No, that was not in their nature. In fact, let’s exercise our rights as members of a free society and give those two, who have practiced democracy in its best form all of their lives, a strong round of applause. And, make a difference by participating in our Democracy.

Thank you.