To: Governor Evers

From: Wisconsin Parks and Recreation Association (WPRA)

Date: October 30, 2020

**RE: Bolster Stewardship Local Assistance Program**

WPRA is a membership association that represents over 1,200 individuals delivering a broad spectrum of services in Wisconsin. Our members include Park, Recreation and Therapeutic Recreation professionals in local, county, state, school district, private and agency settings. WPRA also represents public Park and Recreation Boards and Commissions, students, commercial firms, and retired members.

WPRA supports the Department of Natural Resources’ 2021-23 budget request for a 10-year reauthorization of the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program funded at $50 million annually. **In addition, we respectfully request the 2021-23 Stewardship budget include an increase for Local Assistance grants (LUG) grants to $13 million annually.** WPRA member communities rely on the LUG funds to complete projects that protect the environment, enhance the quality of life for our residents and are equitable to all.

The coronavirus pandemic has drastically changed how Wisconsin residents utilize their local parks and open spaces. According to the [COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports](https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/) park and open space usage in Wisconsin was increased by 314% in July and August. Meanwhile, our community park and recreation departments are facing budget cuts, decreased staffing and cancelled recreational programming.

Even prior to the pandemic, our members relied on the state’s Stewardship program to help support the development of nature-based recreational development. However, over the last decade, the LUG allocation has been funded less than the amount allocated to Nonprofit Conservation Organizations. In fiscal year 2011, $11.5 million was allocated for local assistance. In 2012, the allocation was reduced to $8 million and in 2014 to $6 million, where it remains today. Meanwhile, grant requests continue to vastly exceed the $6 million allocation. Since 2015, total requests averaged $19 million annually and in 2019, of the 93 requests, only one-third of the projects were awarded. This demand for Stewardship local assistance grants is likely to increase in 2021-23.

Furthermore, as the state examines the role of the Stewardship program, we urge you to consider how Stewardship can provide equitable access to nature and the health benefits that green space provides to more urban residents. Our members continuously strive to attain the three pillars, as identified by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA): *Equity, Conservation, and Health and Wellness.* As NPRA states, “we must put equity at the center of all we do.”

The 2021-23 budget is the opportunity to increase funding for the LUG program and focus the program on nature based recreational development for populations centers and to people who may not be able to travel to other parts of the state.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

CC:

Jenni Dye, Policy Director

Jamie Kuhn, Director of Outreach