

LISTENING IN/George Vukelich

Steward of the Land

Spencer Black represents the 77th Assembly District—the west side of Madison, Shorewood Hills and part of Middleton—in the state legislature. He holds two graduate degrees from UW-Madison—a master's in urban and regional planning and a master's in public policy and administration from the La Follette Institute. A former curator at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and a past president of Environment Wisconsin, Black chairs the Assembly Natural Resources Committee. He has proposed a stewardship fund for Wisconsin, which he envisions as the spiritual successor to the now defunct Outdoor Recreation Action Program (ORAP).

"In the 1960s, Gov. Gaylord Nelson began the bipartisan ORAP program to provide a long-term, stable source of funding for the protection of our natural resources and to provide recreational opportunities for the people of Wisconsin.

"Gaylord Nelson was a Democrat, but the bipartisan ORAP program was continued and expanded under Gov. Warren Knowles, a Republican.

"Unfortunately, in the 1980s when environmental issues went on the backburner during the Reagan administration, the legislature raided the ORAP fund. Then, in 1987, Tommy Thompson eliminated the ORAP program entirely.

"The stewardship fund would consist of \$33.3 million per year. The first \$15 million of that would go for land acquisition—buying private lands or easements to private lands that lie in existing state parks, forests and wildlife areas.

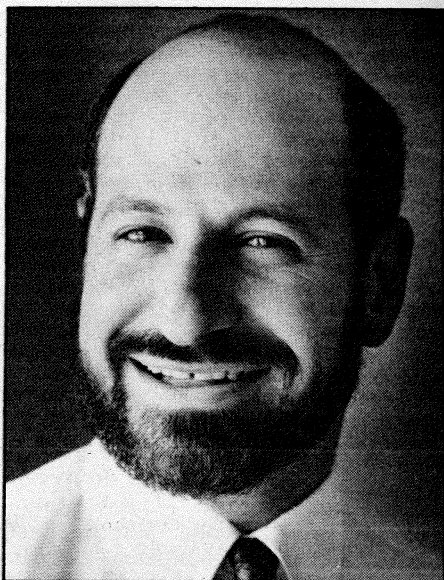
"Three million dollars of that first \$15 million will go for new projects, including protecting the Lower Wisconsin River—a proposal of mine that even the governor has endorsed—by establishing a 77,000-acre state riverway along the 92-mile stretch from the dam at Prairie du Sac down to the confluence with the Mississippi.

"Five million dollars per year would go to a town and urban green space program whereby the state would match, dollar for dollar, monies spent by local governments to protect green and open spaces around our metropolitan areas.

"Two and a half million dollars a year would go to habitat restoration. This would establish ten habitat restoration areas around the state, which, piggy-backing on existing federal programs, would seek to reestablish some of the original landscape and habitat for species that have been in decline.

"Another \$2 million will be spent on expanding the state's trail system and a half-million dollars will go for invigorating environmental education in schools and nature centers.

"I think the opponents of the stewardship fund are going to be in the minority when you take into account



BRENT NICASTRO

Black: 'Public support for protecting the environment is as strong as ever.'

how Wisconsin people feel about our environment. There was a similar bond issue put to the people of Minnesota in the November 1988 election—incidentally, that bond issue was for \$1 billion dollars—and the people of Minnesota approved it by an 81% vote! Ironically, Minnesota modeled its environmental program on Wisconsin's ORAP.

"Public support for protecting the environment is as strong as it has ever been, so in the last campaign we had both candidates for the presidency practically fighting about who could be the the best environmentalist in the White House. That's a long way from eight years ago when Ronald Reagan ran for president ridiculing the whole environmental movement and saying: 'Trees cause more pollution than cars.'

"Traditionally, environmental programs have not done as well in the halls of government as they have in the polls of public opinion and the reason is this: Environmental protection is a long-range goal, a long-range project. We're talking long time span.

"Now, time span for a politician is two years or four years—depending on their term of office—and too often politicians are more concerned with the next election rather than with the next generation.

"That's why the basis of our stewardship fund is to provide a long-term, guaranteed steady source of funding for environmental protection in Wisconsin that is not subject to the daily whims of politics and politicians.

"Certainly, stewardship is in our self-interest, and you can argue that it makes the state a more economically attractive place to live. But I also think that stewardship is a moral obligation that we have to future generations. We have an obligation to the earth that gives us sustenance, and we have to return that bounty by taking care of the earth." ■