

6 March, 2023

Winneshiek County Board of Supervisors:

Good morning,

I am Ray Torresdal. I grew up on a farm just north of Ossian, and have lived in Winneshiek County most of my life. I started R.L. Torresdal Company in 1985 and managed the business until 2021, when I turned it over to a long time employee. I was honored when asked to be on the conservation board many years ago, and it is still one of the most rewarding parts of my experience outside of my family and business.

I am speaking on behalf of former chairs of the Winneshiek County Conservation Board, Nancy Bolson, Meg Storkamp, and myself. We are writing to you in support of the Winneshiek County Conservation Board and its employees. We have had the opportunity to work with Barb Schroeder, the director, as she wisely uses her budget money for programs that benefit the entire county. We have very carefully used county and other available funds to leverage and receive very competitive grants. Over the past 10 years, we, the Conservation Board, have brought in an equivalent of over \$5,000,000 in grants. (\$7,000,000 in the 16 1/2 years Barb has been director) These grants are and have been earmarked for county conservation purposes, such as trail and park development. Grant money cannot be used to supplant budget money, to the contrary, most grants require local matching money for the applications to be considered. Our conservation board is well-respected by conservation boards throughout the state for what it has accomplished in Winneshiek County!

Nancy, Meg and myself have many combined years serving on this board and for a variety of reasons. Some of us have roots reaching back as far as 1849 in this county, growing up on local farms. Some of us hunt and fish, others enjoy walking and biking the trails and kayaking the streams and rivers. We all share a common bond in our love of nature and making the Winneshiek County parks and reserves available for all to enjoy. We have been blessed with board members from many walks of life who have turned into lifelong friends as we've worked together to showcase and protect our beautiful and unique home we call Winneshiek County. One former board member's name immediately springs to mind, Dave Ludwig, a farmer from the Spillville area, name sound familiar? Think Ludwig Prairie, and a

huge advocate for Bohemian Creek, a less well-known trout stream in SW Winneshiek County. In my time on the board and since, a veterinarian, educators, and business owners have worked together to insure the best use of resources.

During the Pandemic, what some have perceived as a want proved to be a need as indoor spaces shut down and residents and visitors alike searched for places to recreate and exercise outdoors. One of the less recognized benefits of our trail system is the improved quality of life it affords our community as people utilize the trails, parks, and recreation areas for both their physical and mental health and well-being. I think we all recognize that the vitality of a community comes from it residents. In our case, because of the recognized quality of life in Winneshiek County, we have many who want to live in our communities. Given what property values have been recently, I have to think that quality of life metrics are drawing people to our communities!

This begs the question; How many of the folks moving into our communities first discovered the amenities developed and supported by the conservation board and others as tourists? Statistics show \$39.6 million in 2021 visitor spending in Winneshiek County. \$39.6 Million! Our bicycle trails generated almost \$5.5 million dollars in spending by non-local visitors in one year! Trout fishing in the Driftless Area is also a large contributor to our local economies and a huge draw for tourists.

So let's turn to something many of us have dealt with, Return on Investment, commonly abbreviated as ROI. As a long time machine shop owner, when I went to the bank for funding for a new machine, one of the questions was always, "How long will this machine take to pay for itself?" ROI. When we look at funding for Winneshiek County Conservation, perhaps we should look at the Return on Investment here as well. Over the last 10 years, the Conservation Board, primarily through the hard work of the director, has been awarded \$5,181,990 in grant funds. These grant funds were and are earmarked for things like trail and park development. These grant funds are not available to the road department, and with one exception wouldn't gravel a single mile of road, or fix a bridge railing on a county road. During the last 10 years these grants equal 81% of the county's investment in county conservation! Then we should look at the additional return on the county's investment in the county conservation board: \$5.5 million/year in non-local spending by tourists utilizing our trail system. With just one year's

174,000 annual trips  
\$8,100,000  
Winneshiek County  
DNR Survey  
Top 2 trout streams in IA

non-local influx of dollars, we have over \$5.5 million dollars generated by our multi-use trails. For an annual investment of less than \$850,000 (\$850,000 that is spent on many things, not just trails!) a Return on Investment of \$5.5 million dollars. These tourist dollars don't include the dollars coming into our county from non-residents coming to fish, kayak and canoe our rivers and streams, another area where county conservation actively works to improve access and quality of the fisheries. This is money spent in our local businesses generating sales tax revenues, meals, gas, overnight accommodations, etc. How many of us will ever see that kind of return on an investment that we make??

But let's face it. ROI is not just about monetary gain, we have quality of life gains as well. Our Conservation Board staff is busy educating all who are interested in learning about our great outdoors. There are regular programs that Larry Reis provides in nursing homes throughout the county. As our population has moved to town, far fewer children have the opportunity to grow up on a farm and see nature firsthand. There are many ongoing school programs, some of which took place even throughout the pandemic, and multiple learning opportunities for people of all ages. There are programs to help you learn to build bird boxes, learn to kayak or canoe, tie flies for fly fishing, nature walks during all seasons, and many more. Additionally, conservation board employees catalog and monitor precious county resources, write plans, and implement forest and prairie management techniques and practices. Staff continuously monitors to control invasive species. A large amount of time and resources are allocated to maintaining aging infrastructure while continually making improvements to parks and trails. All these efforts are part of implementing long-range plans and project development.

While we all recognize that the county budget must be carefully managed, it is irresponsible (penny wise and pound foolish) to cut funding for a program that brings in millions of dollars and improves the quality of life for our citizens. Winneshiek County Conservation is providing a huge return on your investment, both monetarily and in ways that are more difficult to quantify.

As "fiscal conservatives" concerned with the county's investment, we are requesting that the Winneshiek County Supervisors work to avoid the net loss of income to our county and its citizens by requiring the Winneshiek County

Conservation Board to unfairly shoulder more than its share of funding cuts this year and in the coming years.

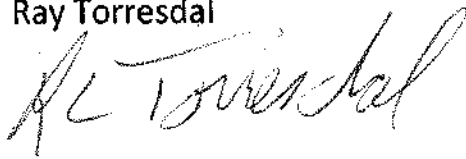
Sincerely,

Nancy Bolson

Meg Storkamp

Handwritten signature of Meg Storkamp in cursive script.

Ray Torresdal

Handwritten signature of Ray Torresdal in cursive script.