

The loss of the Public Intervenor's office is the biggest environmental setback in Wisconsin in over the last 25 years. It will hurt all who care about safe drinking water, clean & clear water and being able to eat the fish we catch. The defeat is saddening and maddening. The first case the Public Intervenor worked on was the statewide ban of DDT. They are the "good guys," the ones protecting us from those who want to do bad things - harm our health, poison our groundwater with chemicals, pave over wetlands, and contaminate our rivers and streams.

How could the legislature possibly consider eliminating this office? Clearly, powerful economic interests like the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, Exxon and the Farm Bureau wanted them axed as it has slowed down or stopped some of their pet projects. When they snapped their fingers, Governor Thompson said "done," and the Republicans marched to the command.

Now we are on our own for some upcoming fights: Exxon's proposal to mine in our Northwoods, a four lane Highway 12 in Dane County and new rules for septic systems. Wisconsin's uncompromising advocate for over 30 years, protecting our rights to clean air and water has been lost.

This wasn't lost without a real fight - we went down swinging. The ill-fated campaign was sort of a David and Goliath story. A broad coalition of conservation and environmental organizations, led by the Decade, worked long and hard with the newly formed Friends of the Public Intervenor Inc. Together we labored late into the night licking stamps, stuffing envelopes, developing political strategy and publicizing the issue on a very modest campaign budget. A 10 minute videotape about the office was produced free of charge and we even bought radio ad time in key legislative districts.

We truly believed that if we worked hard enough on getting the word out, people would respond, legislators would listen to their constituents yearnings and they would vote right. We did a lot of things right, yet we still lost. While that was terribly frustrating, we did succeed in mobilizing incredible public support for the office.

Citizens overwhelmingly backed saving the Public Intervenor. Republicans and Democrats, environmentalists, anglers, hunters, business leaders, moms and farm-

ers who responded enthusiastically in favor of keeping this office. Their efforts generated a ton of mail and phone calls making this an easy vote for Republicans. Nearly every major paper in the state supported saving this office, including the LaCrosse Tribune, one of the state's most conservative papers.

In the northern suburbs of Milwaukee Senator Alberta Darling received over 1300 pieces of mail from her own constituents urging her to save this office. She ignored their wishes, refusing to utter even a word of support for this office when it came time to vote. It was a truly heartbreaking performance especially since we had all worked so hard to make this issue non-partisan.

In the end, every Republican legislator put partisan politics and monied interests above the desires of their constituents. Although all the Democrats voted for restoring the Public Intervenor, the office was doomed without any Republican support.

A few Republicans knew that the public would be irate over the killing of the popular office so they cooked up a phony compromise. Introduced by Senator Robert Cowles in the Joint Finance Committee, the compromise keeps the name "Public Intervenor" but nothing else. It retains one attorney, moves them from the Department of Justice to the Department of Natural Resources, the key agency they are supposed to watchdog. The compromise eliminates the Intervenor's ability to *sue if state environmental laws are ignored or unenforced*, effectively defanging the watchdog.

The bogus compromise is political trickery, pure and simple. Its backers planned to vote against the Public Intervenor but they wanted something to help quell the heat back home. We see through this and reject such political games.

But it's not over. This Fall, legislators such as Rep. Spencer Black (see "letter" pg 7) will reintroduce the Conservation Restoration Act. The bill includes restoring the Public Intervenor's Office. And given the kind of momentum this issue has gathered, the 1996 elections may make the environment a major election issue. Legislators who chose to ignore their own constituents' pleas to save this office may be surprised by the hunters, anglers and canoeists who don't take kindly to their votes.

Tom Dawson and Kathleen Falk serve as the Public's Intervenor for 19 and 17 years respectively. The Decade salutes their devotion and work. They helped protect the public's right to a clean environment and their technical assistance aided thousands of us. Wisconsin was fortunate to employ these fair, effective and hardworking advocates.

We pledge to both of them that we will not give up and we will not back down - neither should they. In fact, maybe they ought to consider a run for statewide office - Supreme Court, Governor, Senate. What do you think? Send us your thoughts and we will print them in our next newsletter.

by Pam Porter



Public Intervenor's Kathleen Falk and Tom Dawson greet former Senator Gaylord Nelson at the Decade's reception for him in Madison