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Keep intervenor as watchdog

Dear Editor: This letter is in response to the ongoing debate generated by the governor's budget proposal to eliminate the Office of Public Intervenor.

I was attorney general when the public intervenor was created by the Kellett Reorganization of State Government, which the Legislature adopted in 1968. At that time the protection of the natural resources of the state was administered by an agency known as the Conservation Commission, which had administrative and regulatory powers and responsibilities similar to the present DNR's.

The Kellett plan originally proposed merging the Conservation Commission with another state agency known as the Department of Resource Development. The Conservation Congress, an influential advisory body created by the Legislature, strongly opposed this merger as creating two totally inconsistent and incompatible missions in one agency; i.e., protecting natural resources on the one hand while promoting their development on the other. The merger could not be approved by the Legislature without the support of the Conservation Congress.

The proposal to create the public intervenor as a totally independent watchdog over the DNR to ensure that its mission to protect and preserve our natural resources would not be subsumed by promoting their development was the key in gaining the support of the Conservation Congress for the creation of the DNR. With that support, the Legislature approved the merger.

We should learn from this history, especially now when the current administration is proposing to balance the budget by selling off pristine forests and lakes in northern Wisconsin, which are owned by all the people.

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