

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
The State of Minnesota

State Office Building, Room G95  
100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155



Joseph Benes, Chairman  
Michael R. Baltus, Vice-Chairman  
Anita Sonaglia, Supervisor  
Grace Derfler, Clerk  
Roberta M. Truempler, Treasurer  
Spang Township  
39105 Spang Road  
Hill City, MN 55748

Friday, July 12, 2019

Dear Spang Township Officials:

Thank you for your letter of June 28, 2019 and for stating your concerns so well.

I will forward your letter to the members of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) and include it as part of my report to the Council at their next meeting on August 7, 2019.

As you may already be aware, the LSOHC is a statutorily directed recommending body comprised of 8 appointed citizen members and 4 appointed legislative members (two senators and two representatives). Per Minnesota Statute 97A.056, subd. 3, the Council is charged as follows:

*"The Council shall make recommendations to the legislature on appropriations of money from the outdoor heritage fund that are consistent with the constitution and state law and that will achieve the outcomes of existing natural resource plans, including, but not limited to, the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan, that directly relate to the restoration, protection, and enhancement of wetlands, prairies, forests, and habitat for fish, game, and wildlife, and that prevent forest fragmentation, encourage forest consolidation, and expand restored native prairie."*

Within that charge, in 2009 the Council recommended that the legislature appropriate the Outdoor Heritage Fund monies that were ultimately used to finance the purchase of a conservation easement upon the Blandin property. After many public hearings and much legislative review, the appropriation was made by the legislature and signed into law by the Governor.

I mention the preceding not in any attempt to remove the Council from the conversation, but rather to clarify that the Council is simply a recommending body and, after much public review, the legislature ultimately appropriates the funding.

Currently, two State Senators (Andrew Lang and David Tomassoni) and two State Representatives (Jamie Becker-Finn and Dan Fabian) are members of the Council. As members of the Council, they will receive copies of your letter and this reply. To keep your local legislators in the loop, I am also copying this letter to Senators Carrie Ruud and Justin Eichorn, and Representatives Sandy Layman and Dale Lueck.

Once again, I thank you for your thoughtful letter and assure you that it will be forwarded to the Council for their consideration. Also, please allow me to express my thanks to each of you for your public service on behalf of the residents of Spang Township. My wife and I raised our two children in the Grand Rapids/Hill City area for 23 years. It will always hold a very special place in our hearts as we have many fond memories and friendships that spawned within the area.

Kindest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Wm. Johnson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Wm. Johnson  
Executive Director  
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Cc     Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council members  
       Senator Carrie Ruud  
       Senator Justin Eichorn  
       Representative Sandy Layman  
       Representative Dale Lueck

# **SPANG TOWNSHIP**

**39105 Spang Road  
Hill City, Minnesota 55748**

June 28, 2019

Mark Johnson, Executive Director  
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard  
State Office Building, Room 95  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155

Dear Mr. Johnson:

We, the members of the town board of Spang Township in Itasca County, are presenting this letter to express our concern about the large increase in property taxes for the residents of our township for the year 2019. Our residents are paying 20-40% more this year that they did in 2018. Itasca County is also projecting the taxes to keep going up for several years.

Our understanding is that the main reason for the increase is because of the devaluation of Blandin Paper Company lands. This results in Blandin paying much less tax than previously, so the residents of the township have to make up the difference. Blandin owns about 82% of the land in Spang Township, so you can see what a large affect the devaluation has on our resident's taxes.

In 2017 Itasca County settled a court case with Blandin agreeing to a reduced value for their lands. We understand that the main reason for the devaluation was in the year 2010 Blandin received approximately \$ 44,000,000.00 from the Heritage Fund to put their land in a conservation easement. They would do no subdivisions for sales or development, but could still manage their lands as always for wood production. They would also keep their lands open for public use such as hunting, berry picking, bird watching, hiking, pleasure driving, etc. We think this is a great idea to preserve these large blocks of land for use by residents of our state and other states as well as for future generations, but Blandin is claiming their land is worth less because of it.

The funding for the conservation easement came from state funds and it was done to benefit all people in Minnesota; but now because of the resulting devaluation of Blandin lands, the burden to pay for the preservation is placed on a few townships in Itasca County with large blocks of Blandin land. The populations of these townships are a very small percentage of the total population in Minnesota.

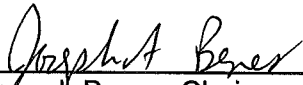
We feel since the state created the events that led to the devaluation of Blandin lands, the state has an obligation to compensate our township and other townships with large blocks of Blandin ownership, for the loss of tax monies.

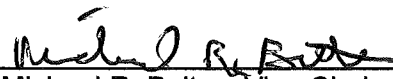
Spang Township has a population of about 259 people. It is not reasonable or ethical to expect such a small percentage of the state's population to pay for preserving a large tract of land which benefits all residents of the State of Minnesota. We think this issue needs immediate attention.

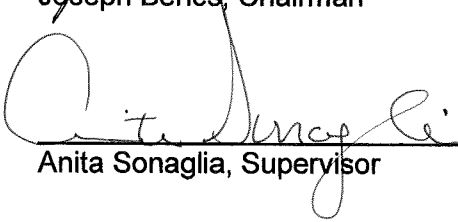
Thank you for your consideration.

Mark Johnson  
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
June 28, 2019  
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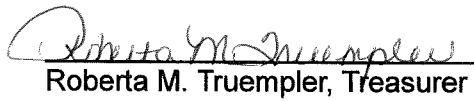
Sincerely,

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Joseph Benes, Chairman

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael R. Baltus, Vice-Chairman

  
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Anita Sonaglia, Supervisor

  
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Grace Derfler, Clerk

  
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Roberta M. Truempler, Treasurer

Mark,

Thank you for keeping me in the loop on your correspondence with Spang Township. I am aware of this situation and I wholeheartedly agree with the residents of Spang that this sudden shift in tax obligation has hit them uniquely and unfairly. Nobody anticipated that Blandin would challenge their tax value once this conservation easement was approved and funded by the legislature.

I was chief author of the SFIA bill in 2017 that we utilized to eliminate the obligation of local taxing authorities to compensate Blandin for back taxes and Blandin also agreed to a declining schedule to "ease into" their new tax valuation.

I appreciate your quick response to the township's concerns as expressed in their letter and hope the LSOHC will have a thorough discussion of this issue at your August meeting.

Best regards,

**Sandy Layman**

State Representative District 5B  
651-296-4936

***Above all else, be kind.***

Please contact my Legislative Assistant, Betsy Ritzer, for scheduling related inquiries.

[betsy.ritzer@house.mn](mailto:betsy.ritzer@house.mn)

651-296-5489

Subscribe to my email updates by

clicking here: <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/members/join.asp?id=15467>

>>> Mark Johnson <[mark.johnson@lsohc.leg.mn](mailto:mark.johnson@lsohc.leg.mn)> 07/12/19 9:03 AM >>>

Dear Senators Eichorn and Ruud, and Representatives Layman and Lueck:

For your consideration, and simply to keep you in the loop with regards to your constituents, attached please find a letter which I received yesterday from the officials of Spang Township in Itasca County. Within the same PDF is my reply letter.

The letter and reply have been forwarded to the LSOHC for their consideration and will be included as part of my Executive Director's report to the Council at their next meeting on August 7, 2019.

While there is probably no action necessary by any of you, I thought you would appreciate being kept abreast of the Township's concerns. Also, since your respective districts somewhat converge at or near Spang Township, I thought it best to make sure each of you received this message.

I trust you are each having an enjoyable summer.

Personal regards,

Mark

Mark Wm. Johnson  
Executive Director  
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council  
651-296-6397