



Report to the Sustainability Commission of the City of Green Bay

MEETING DATE

July 15, 2025

AGENDA ITEM # R.2

To approve the Sustainability Commission proceeding with a collaborative process for drafting a Rights of Nature resolution.

BACKGROUND

The "Rights of Nature" movement frames natural ecosystems and features such as rivers, wetlands, forests, and other living communities as legal persons that hold the right to exist, flourish, and be defended in a court of law.^[1] While most environmental regulations treat nature as property to be managed for human benefit, this movement asks governments to shift the paradigm and recognize nature itself as a legal entity with inherent rights. Although writing Rights of Nature into policy is relatively new, the concept itself is not. Indigenous cultures have embraced this worldview for generations. Now, several Wisconsin jurisdictions are beginning to follow suit. Key milestones include:

- **Milwaukee County (Oct. 2023)** – Became the first Wisconsin jurisdiction to approve a non-binding Rights of Nature resolution, affirming that the Menomonee, Milwaukee, and the Fox River, as well as Lake Michigan have the right to be "healthy, robust, and resilient."^[1] County leaders called the measure a "first step in awareness."^[2]
- **Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin (2020)** – Declared the Menominee River a rights-bearing entity, including the right to clean water, natural flow, and freedom from harmful activities.^[3]
- **Ho-Chunk Nation (2015; amended 2018)** – Became the first U.S. tribe to embed Rights of Nature principles in its constitution.^[4]
- **Statewide advocacy** – Coalitions such as Rights of Nature Wisconsin, Menikanaehkem, JOSHUA, and the faith-based network WISDOM have encouraged additional counties, municipalities, and eventually the state legislature to pass "Rights of Nature"-centered legislation.^[6]

These actions reflect a growing recognition that protecting Wisconsin's environment requires more than limiting damage; it requires affirming its inherent rights.

^[1] Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, *A Resolution Supporting the "Rights of Nature" Movement across Waterways and Bodies of Water in Milwaukee County*, File No. 23-785, adopted September 21, 2023 (signed September 25, 2023), <https://ecojurisprudence.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/COUNTY-BOARD-RESOLUTION.pdf>.

^[2] Evan Casey, "Milwaukee County Is First in Wisconsin to Pass 'Rights of Nature' Resolution," *Wisconsin Public Radio*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.wpr.org/environment/milwaukee-county-first-wisconsin-pass-rights-nature-resolution>.

^[3] Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, Tribal Legislature, *Recognition of the Rights of the Menominee River*, Resolution No. 19-52 (adopted January 16, 2020), *Eco-Jurisprudence*

Monitor, https://ecojurisprudence.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/US_Menominee_Menominee-River_193.pdf.

[4] Ho-Chunk Nation, *Proposed Resolution to Amend the Constitution of the Ho-Chunk Nation: Article X, Section 2 “Rights of Nature”* (approved by General Council, September 17, 2018), PDF, Eco-Jurisprudence Monitor, https://ecojurisprudence.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/US_Ho-Chunk_Ho-Chunk-Nation-Resolution-Rights-of-Nature_157.pdf.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommend the Sustainability Commission to draft a Rights of Nature resolution for the Common Council’s consideration. This resolution could be modeled on Milwaukee County’s 2023 resolution and tailored to Green Bay’s unique natural assets. Key elements for inclusion in the resolution text and for the drafting process:

1. **Recognition of local ecosystems** – Affirm that the Bay of Green Bay, the Fox and East Rivers, and associated wetlands possess the right to clean water, habitat integrity, and restoration.
2. **Rights-based standards** – Borrow wording from the Menominee River declaration—e.g., the right to “abundant, pure, clean, unpolluted water” and freedom from activities that infringe upon these rights.^[7]
3. **Collaborative drafting** – Engage Tribal Nations and community partners to ensure the resolution reflects Indigenous knowledge and local values.
4. **Referral to staff** – Once a draft resolution is prepared, direct city staff to evaluate legal pathways, potential enforcement mechanisms, and alignment with existing environmental regulations, and to report back with implementation options.

Adopting such a resolution would further position Green Bay as a leader in environmental justice, complement ongoing conservation and sustainability initiatives, and honor the region’s Indigenous heritage.

FISCAL IMPACT

None

ATTACHMENTS

- I. Rights of Nature_support docs