MONTELLO — A year or two ago, it was hard for some Columbia County officials to mention the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources without scowling.

That was because county officials were embroiled in a controversy over a proposed public shooting range — and, according to County Board Chairman Vern Gove, every meeting on the issue between county and DNR officials involved someone different from the DNR.

The issues surrounding discharging firearms on state property continue in Columbia County, but Gove told members of the Intercounty Coordinating Committee on Monday that the relationship between the county and the DNR has improved significantly.

“It’s good to see the same players at the table,” he said.

ICC is a consortium of officials from Columbia, Dodge, Green Lake, Jefferson, Marquette and Sauk counties, who get together monthly to discuss issues that affect all the counties.

For Monday’s meeting in Montello, the topic was “Communicating and Working Effectively with State Agencies.”

The panel of speakers included representation from two state agencies that work closely with counties every day — the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the DNR.

Mark Aquino of the DNR said a recent change in his job title — he’s now known as “the secretary’s director” — has increased efficiency in the relationship between counties and the DNR.

Aquino is the representative of DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp for a region that includes ICC member counties Columbia, Dodge, Jefferson and Sauk.

What that means, he said, is that he and his counter parts should be the first contact for county officials who have a DNR-related issue, regardless of which of the DNR’s numerous programs is involved. Then he can put together a team from the DNR to address the issue.

“Secretaries’ directors can be one-stop shopping,” he said.

Martin Havlovic, community resources development educator for the University of Wisconsin-Extension Marquette County, said communication between the DNR and counties needs to be a “two-way street” — meaning that, when a citizen has gone to the DNR to address an issue in a particular county, the county officials should be notified and involved.

Aquino replied, “I’m going to be open — this is something that the DNR needs to do better.”

Andy Ross, immediate past chairman of the Columbia County Board of Supervisors, said the DNR
has lately been extensively involved in Columbia County, not only on the shooting range, but also on the DNR’s assumption of education programs at the MacKenzie Environmental Education Center near Poynette.

“I’m not here to say everything got smoother and all problems went away,” Ross said, “but I felt a lot more comfortable than I did before Mark got involved.”

Columbia County Board Vice Chairwoman Mary Cupery noted that Columbia County also has had dealings with the DOT — specifically, about the deterioration of state roads in the county, including highways 33, 51, 16 and 22.

“They’re all bad,” Cupery said. “But what are we going to do about it — just wait?”

Jeffrey Gust, the DOT’s southwest regional planning chief, said that, on one hand, the DOT has identified numerous roads in Columbia County that need fixing.

On the other hand, money to fix roads is very limited. That’s why there’s no firm timetable to repair any of the roads that Cupery mentioned.

“I have $68 million for 16 counties,” he said, “and the money doesn’t go very far.”

Marquette County Board Chairman Bob Miller said there’s an old wooden railroad bridge on a town of Buffalo road that is in such bad shape, there’s talk of routing traffic away from it — including people, such as Miller, who live in the bridge’s vicinity.

Gove noted that Columbia County is dealing with a similar situation. In about a year, work is scheduled to begin to replace a wooden railroad bridge on County Highway M. The rickety structure, more than a century old, stands 34 feet above Union Pacific railroad tracks that run in a ravine.

In October 2013, the County Board, by a non-unanimous vote, took ownership of the bridge, clearing the way for the federal government to pay 80 percent of the $1.3 million cost to replace it.

Miller said, however, that the town of Buffalo could not afford even 20 percent of the bridge’s replacement cost, so the town taking ownership would not be financially feasible.

Other issues that were raised at Monday’s meeting include:

• Signage for businesses along state roads scheduled for major maintenance. Gust urged local business leaders, such as chambers of commerce, to work closely with the DOT to ensure that the size and placement of “open for business” signs conform to DOT standards.

• Roundabouts. Gust acknowledged that people often are hostile to the idea of roundabouts, and many local people don’t like them much even when they’re in place. However, he said, the DOT has data showing that roundabouts significantly reduce crashes and fatalities.

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