

BUILDERS' CONCESSION

'Crucial' wetland to stay pristine

State proposing stricter rules for man-made wetlands

Monday, February 19, 2007

Spencer Hunt

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In the spring, about 60 blue herons will return to their nests on the Northeast Side and raise their hatchlings.

Now that developers have scaled back some plans for the area, conservationists say the herons are more likely to return year after year.

The rookery, which ecologists call the largest in Franklin County, is in a wetland, and wetlands are vanishing in the Columbus area and across Ohio.

This particular site, which conservationists say covers about 57 acres near Rt. 161 and Hamilton Road, was the latest front in a battle between environmentalists and developers.

The New Albany Co. and the Casto Development Co. wanted to build stores, offices and condos nearby. But at a zoning meeting Thursday night, they said they would set their sights lower and leave the wetland untouched.

"It's a crucial, sensitive area," said Bill Resch, a member of Friends of Big Walnut Creek and Tributaries.

Once considered little more than an obstacle to farming and transportation, swamps and bogs are now known as

Graphic

- [Replacing wetlands in central Ohio](#)

The Hot Issue

- [Should wetland preservation rules be toughened?](#)



Friends of the Big Walnut Creek members Toni Stahl, left, Bob Kyle, center, Susann Moeller and Bill Resch celebrate at a wetland near Rt. 161 and Hamilton Road that will be spared development.

natural filters of water pollution. They also provide essential breeding grounds for birds, frogs and salamanders.

State and federal laws require that developers create new wetlands or buy into existing wetlands in "mitigation banks" to replace what they destroy.

Ohio Environmental Protection Agency records show that developers filled in 117 acres of wetlands statewide in 2005, and either created or purchased 284 replacement acres.



While the bank method has been debated for years, a new Ohio EPA report says replacement wetlands don't measure up to the real thing.

A plant survey of nearly 1,000 acres in 12 mitigation banks found that 25 percent were little more than "unvegetated ponds."

Of the remaining acres, 25 percent rated "poor" and 58 percent rated "fair."

Though 18 percent rated "good," none of the wetlands achieved the top "excellent" rating, said Mick Micacchion, an Ohio EPA ecologist.

The report also looked at amphibians, and said that all but four of the banked wetlands were of poor quality.

"We have not really been compensating for what we've been losing," Micacchion said.

All but 5 of the 623 acres in the four central Ohio banks have been sold.

Vince Messerly, president of the Ohio Wetlands Foundation, which builds and maintains mitigation banks, said manmade wetlands can't compare to natural areas that have evolved over centuries.

In an attempt to close that gap, the Ohio EPA proposed a set of wetland rules more than a year ago that would require developers to build wetlands with soils and plants similar to the ones they filled.

Vincent Squillace, a lobbyist with the Ohio Home Builders Association, called the proposed standards too expensive and almost impossible to achieve.

"They have to be reasonable," he said.

Keith Dimoff, deputy director of the Ohio Environmental Council, said the same of developers.

"They have had an on-thecheap system where they can fill in a wetland or stream and not really replace it," Dimoff said.

Randy Bournique, manager of the Ohio EPA's wetlands section, said the agency hopes to come up with a compromise by September.

shunt@dispatch.com

Copyright © 2007, The Columbus Dispatch
