Urban growth threatens area wetlands, wildlife

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He stands smack in the middle of the route of the proposed Romence Road extension, peering over the edge of Portage Creek, when something leaps out of the muck, scares him silly, then plods back into the water.

"Well," says City Engineer Jamie Dyer, shaking his head. "Add leopard frog to the list." The list, that is, of animals who have made these cattail-rich, soggy lands their home.

It is where deer can roam without the fear of headlights. It is where birds can land freely without getting hit by speeding cars.

This is a wetland. And soon the Romence Road extension could be built right through about four acres of it.

Environmental experts say the project could disturb the whole character of the wetlands area.

Wetlands are crucial for wildlife and also filter pollution from water. But in the face of development, wetlands are being nickeled and dimed right off the maps, environmentalists say.

And nowhere in Kalamazoo County are so many wetlands facing the threat of urbanization as in Portage, says W. Thomas Straw, chairman of the Western Michigan University geology department and a national wetlands expert.

"I suspect Portage is growing faster than the rest of the county," Straw said. "There are places in the county with as many wetlands, but they are not being impacted as severely as in Portage."

Earlier this month, Portage made an effort to protect wetlands by asking voters to approve a five-year, 1-mill tax to purchase wetlands and other environmentally sensitive land in the city.

But voters turned down the request on Nov. 6 by a 7,119-to-5,222 vote.

City officials say they will look at other options for protecting wetlands, including zoning restrictions that would prevent developers from building on wetlands.

And as far the Romence Road project goes, Portage has hired a consulting engineering company, Moore & Bruggink Inc. of Grand Rapids, to design the road so that it has the least impact possible on the wetlands, Dyer said.

In addition, the city is already planning to create wetlands in another location if the Michigan Department of Natural Resources approves the road project.

One stretch along Portage Creek at Romence

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INSIDE:

- Environmental advocates seek stronger laws to prevent wetlands development. But some developers say they blend land preservation with conscientious construction. E1.

- What is a wetland and why are they so important, anyway? E1.

- Farmers complain that the federal Swampbuster Act prevents them from growing crops on wetlands but doesn’t stop them from being taxed, E4.

- Citizens are jumping on the bandwagon to help the state protect wetlands, but the Department of Natural Resources suspects that many cases of lawbreaking are going unreported. E4.

- Charleston Township is a local leader when it comes to zoning laws, E4.

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WETLANDS
Continued from Al.
Road is so rich in wetlands that
the DNR is monitoring the whole
corridor for development requests,
says Kim Rice, district manager
for the land and water manage-
ment division of the Plainwell dis-
trict DNR office.
But Portage isn’t the only area
in Kalamazoo County feeling the
wetland crunch.
The DNR recently released fig-
ures showing that the county has a
total of 18,700 acres of wetlands.
But Straw says these wetlands
are quickly being chipped away,
too.
In Kalamazoo, where less vac-
ant land is available than in Por-
tage, Western Michigan University
is proposing to build a 319-acre
business park near Asylum Lake
over the next 20 years.
A university report calls the
property “the last major parcel of
land for industrial development in
Kalamazoo.”
“It represents a significant de-
velopment opportunity for the uni-
versity and the CEO Council,”
says the report.
But the development would se-
verely damage nearby wetlands
and larger bodies of water such as
Portage Creek, Asylum Lake and
Little Asylum Lake, environmental-
ists say.
Street runoff of oil, gasoline and
dirt would trickle into the wet-
lands and surrounding lakes, says
Mark Hoffman, a concerned citi-
zen and vocal opponent of the pro-
posed business park.
Add probable street widening,
car noise and fumes, and watch an
oasis for fish, mallard ducks, Can-
da geese and even a great blue
heron turn into an environmental
ghost town, Hoffman warns.
“I’ll also work to kill many of
the habitants of the lakes and wet-
lands,” Hoffman said. “Asylum
Lake is really heavily assaulted
right now.”

But Richard Burke, WMU vice-
president for regional education
and economic development, says
that the park would not be built on
any wetlands. The park’s design
could actually prevent seepage
from other development from go-
ing into Asylum Lake, Burke said.
“With wise and careful develop-
ment, we can greatly assist that
lake and water that flows from
it,” Burke said.
Larger wetlands areas cannot
be altered without a permit from
the Department of Natural Re-
sources.
The strongest wetlands-protec-
tion law in Michigan was adopted
in the 1970s under the Goemaere-Anderson Wetlands
Protection Act of 1978.
Essentially, the law requires a
permit from the DNR to dredge
and build on wetlands of five or
more acres standing alone or any
size wetland connected to a larger
body of water. The law applies to
counties with more than 100,000
people.
But DNR officials concede that
enforcement of the law is a prob-
lem because of inadequate staff-
ing.
“There are two people in the
(DNR’s Plainwell) water division
covering seven counties. We have
to review the complaints by their
merits,” Rice said.
The two DNR employees are
charged with protecting more
than 100,000 acres in Kalamazoo,
Berrien, Cass, Allegan, Van Buren
and St. Joseph counties.
They processed about 500 per-
mits last year, not all of which are
for “wetlands” construction con-
struction, Rice said, and she ex-
pects the same amount to be
processed this year.
And people wonder why we’re
so busy,” Rice said.
Statewide last year, 6,149 per-
mit applications for develop-
ment on lakes, streams and wet-
lands, about 79 percent of the
permits were granted, said Peg
Boswick of the DNR. But only
eight of the permits involved de-
velopment on more than an-acre
of wetlands, she said.
“I think we are doing as good a
job as anyone in the country,”
Boswick said of DNR efforts to
protect wetlands. “Most states
don’t look at projects under an
acre.”
Farmers and developers, who
are considered the main culprits
by environmentalists when it
comes to wetlands destruction, say
they are doing what they can to
protect wetlands.
If you wanted to protect every
wetland in Kalamazoo County,
says Vicksburg farmer John Os-
wall, no one would be let in to the
county. The rich muckland here
was what produced celery fields
and helped secure jobs for incom-
ing citizens.
Now, Oswall says, farmers are
interested in reaching a compro-
mise with environmentalists that
will not break their pocketbooks.
And Josh Weiner, chief execu-
tive officer of the Meyer C. Wei-
ner development company in
Portage, says that developers are
working around wetlands actually
using them to their advantage in
condominium projects.
But Straw says the issue goes
beyond sensitive planning. Stricter
local accountability, education and
environmental concern are also
needed to save one of the planet’s
most important resources, he says.
“We have to keep in mind how
much of a resource it really is.”

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