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Wetlands protection urged

Vegetation aids in filtering pollutants



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Robert Cannon, Clinton Township supervisor, left, and Leon Drolet, a commissioner, stand in front of man-made wetlands.

By Santiago Esparza, and Hawke Fracassa / The Detroit News

WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP -- Some Macomb County officials believe they have found a low-tech solution to their pollution problems: wetlands.

In Clinton Township, developers are being pushed to include wetlands in projects and to protect existing wetlands, while Washington Township officials are drafting an ordinance to make sure new building projects don't destroy any of the township's 25 wetlands.

"This is something we can directly affect. We are trying to preserve wetlands and use them as an amenity," Washington Township Supervisor Gary Kirsh said.

But protecting wetlands is no easy task, township clerk R.J. Brainard said.

"We have some excellent laws on the books to preserve our wetlands and open spaces," Brainard said.

"Developers buy up a lot of land and can exert pressure."

Naturally occurring wetlands contain pollution-fighting vegetation and filter out pollutants from rainwater before it trickles into waterways such as the Clinton River in Clinton Township, and then on into Lake St. Clair.

Man-made wetlands can do the same thing, and a program in neighboring St. Clair County is seeing how effective man-made wetlands can be in cleaning household waste water. The federal Environmental Protection Agency gave grants to four St. Clair County homeowners to install the man-made wetlands.

The program eliminates the needs for expensive septic fields that can cost as much as \$10,000. Man-made wetlands cost about a third of that amount.

Space needed

But man-made wetlands require areas with a lot of space. Clinton Township only has about 13 percent of its land free for development, Supervisor Robert Cannon said.

Clinton Township was fined \$250,000 in 1998 by the EPA, when officials discovered that the township had illegally pumped sewage into the river to stave off basement flooding.

Planning officials are surveying the community to find out where all of the wetlands are "and where they ought to be," Cannon said.

"We're already 80-85 percent developed and we want to salvage wetlands wherever we can for one last hurrah," he said.

The township will do that two ways: First, by creating an ordinance that will allow the township to create wetlands of less than 5 acres. State law only allows parcels 5 acres or larger to have such a designation.

Cannon said the new law is in committee now, but he expects it to win township board approval and to be put in place by April.

The township also is suggesting to all developers that they transform unused parking lot space into natural wetlands.

Wetlands survey

The results of the Clinton River Watershed Council's survey of wetlands in the Stony Creek watershed are available online at www.crwc.org.



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Site of a bowling alley parking lot east of Gratiot and south of Hall where officials hope to create wetlands to absorb rain run-off to curb pollution.

"If they're required by ordinance to have a parking lot that needs 500 spaces for cars, we're suggesting they maybe create 465 spaces for cars and use the remaining 35 spaces to beautify their property while letting water drain off the property naturally," Cannon said.

"That water would normally go directly to a storm drain. Under this setup, the water would still go into a storm drain, but would be filtered naturally into the earth through the new wetland."

These changes will reduce the need to send sewage to a septic tank, he said.

Wetlands scattered

Since Washington's 25 wetlands are scattered throughout the township, any new ordinance would have to take into account each particular wetland and the area in which it is located, Supervisor Kirsh said.

Kirsh said he has left about six feet of grass on either side of a creek on his farm.

He said he did this because he doesn't have a wetland on his property and is concerned about rain water carrying pollutants into the creek. He said a man-made wetland could be the answer for others with similar problems.

"It's amazing what they can do if applied properly," he said.

Jeanna M. Paluzzi, executive director of the Clinton River Watershed Council, praised the various efforts involving wetlands.

The watershed council recently completed a survey of wetlands in the Stony Creek watershed, which rests in Oakland and Macomb townships. As part of the survey, information on the condition of the wetlands was gathered. The survey also included what types of legislation might be needed from surrounding communities to protect the wetlands.

"We do not want wetlands used just to filter rain water, but they can help keep pollution out of the (Clinton) river," she said.

Timothy Lozen, director of the Friends of St. Clair, said the man-made wetlands program in St. Clair County could work in northern Macomb.

"It's certainly not the answer for every area, but there are some places they would work well," Lozen said. "There are properties in both Romeo and Washington Township where this set-up would be appropriate."

Elwin Coll, director of Environmental Health Services with the Macomb County Health Department, said such systems have yet to be proposed in Macomb.

"This is one type of alternative sewage treatment system that has not been used a lot for residences," Coll said. "But seeing how they operate and how effective they are would be beneficial to technology advancement."

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