

Wetlands control battle brewing

By PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Local officials will be watching the state Legislature this week as the so-called Wetlands Legislation is discussed by the House Committee on Conservation, Recreation and Environment.

At stake is the ability to protect or regulate small parcels of wetlands, those five acres or smaller in size.

Losing that ability could be an environmental disaster, according to David Mekarski, West Bloomfield township planning and environmental director — an opinion supported by State Sen. David Honigman, R-West Bloomfield.

Regulating wetlands is important in many communities. But it's a particularly hot topic in West Bloomfield because of growing concerns about the environment — and how the loss of wetlands would affect the area's quality of life.

Week's schedule

Honigman was one of those who spoke briefly Tuesday afternoon when the House committee took up Senate Bill 522 in Lansing. "I was cut short," he said Friday. "There was a ton of bills before the committee and we had to get to the bottom of the issue."

Mineral of the concerns of West Bloomfield, Honigman drafted legislation, S.B. 522, to weaken the impact of another bill that would take

away or drastically undercut the authority of local communities to regulate or preserve wetlands.

That legislation, S.B. 522, was introduced last year by State Sen. Paul Wartner, R-Portage, sending shock waves through environmentally conscious communities like West Bloomfield.

"We put out a 'legislative alert' immediately," Mekarski said. Considerable behind-the-scenes negotiation has taken place over the last six months or so, said Honigman, "and we've come up with some compromises."

Those compromises were intact last week, Honigman said. "So I believe the final bill is something we (West Bloomfield) can live with."

The senator expects the legislation to be taken up again this week, which means it could be moved out of committee and referred to the entire Legislature this year. If so, Gov. John Engler could sign it.

Others are less optimistic. State Rep. Jan C. Dolan, R-Farmington Hills, said she expects a compromise, but maybe not this session. "We've got a busy agenda," said Dolan, a member of the committee. "I'm not sure we'll get to it. It could be held over."

Either way, West Bloomfield will be watching.

An originally proposed, S.B. 522 would do away with ordinances local communities, including West Bloomfield, enacted — and tried to

enforce — to protect dwindling wetlands.

Small areas affected

State law offers protection for larger tracts of wetlands, but does not address, regulate or protect smaller parcels — those five acres or smaller — leaving such regulation to local communities.

The original S.B. 522 would do away with local ordinances to protect those sites.

Honigman acknowledges the existing method of monitoring small parcels of wetlands needs change. In their zeal to protect small wetlands, some communities possibly went too far with their ordinances.

Sometimes the strategy was to require builders or developers to go through too much red tape, making the land less attractive and more expensive to develop.

More than one developer has leveled that criticism at West Bloomfield.

But there's room for compromise, Honigman said. One compromise, for example, establishes a 90-day time limit, during which a community must act on an application dealing with wetlands.

"No more dragging things out forever," Honigman said.

Another compromise Honigman supports would limit the number of agencies involved in processing applications.

Some communities shuttled developers back and forth between

agencies — boards, commissions and committees. Intended or not, that increased red tape and made the process more expensive, and less appealing to developers.

If his amendments are enacted, Honigman said wetlands applications would be handled by two agencies. In West Bloomfield, for example, application might be processed by the planning commission, and then referred to the township board for consideration.

That would likely be considered bad news in West Bloomfield, where officials take pride in local control, often to the exasperation of developers.

One person keeping close tabs on the pending legislation is Michael Schwartz, a member of West Bloomfield's Wetlands Review Board and chairman of the Oakland County Environmental Protection Council.

Schwartz, one of seven candidates for the township board, wants the township to maintain some local control.

The state of Michigan, which tries to protect wetlands through the Department of Natural Resources, simply doesn't have the resources to do an adequate job, Schwartz said.

He believes the township is better served by its own ordinances.

"We think this matter is too important to leave to the state. We're willing to enact our own regulations and we're willing to enforce them."

Cops puzzle over pipe bomb find

By GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

Students stood in the north parking lot at Andover High School in Bloomfield Hills Thursday seeming somewhat bemused that they were getting a day off.

But the reason for the early dismissal was deadly serious: four pipe bombs were found in the 100-foot radio tower at radio station WBFH, which operates out of the school and is only feet from the southeast corner of the school building.

Who planted the bomb and why is a mystery, school administrators and police said. Students were also bewildered.

Students were ushered to the parking lot away from the school as officers from Bloomfield Township, Oakland County and the Michigan State Police were called to investigate.

At about 10:30 a.m. students and staff were told to go home.

District Superintendent W. Robert Docking dismissed classes.

"I decided it was in the best interest of the kids to have them off site and send them home," Docking said this was the first time in his 36-year career in education that he had to dismiss classes because of a bomb threat.

The bombs were discovered at about 8:45 a.m. by radio broad-

casting teacher and WBFH station manager Pete Bowers.

Bowers noticed the small access panel at the base of the tower was open. He looked inside and saw the bombs. A Bloomfield Township officer was speaking to a hall monitor in the school, and Bowers asked the officer to look at the objects.

The officer did and immediately notified administration and police that the objects looked like bombs.

The bombs were about 3-inches wide and 12-inches long, capped at both ends, sealed with duct tape and had holes drilled in the center for fuses. None of the bombs had fuses.

But they were potentially deadly.

"This was not a prank," said Dan Fournier of the Oakland County crime lab, which removed the bombs at about 10:15 a.m. and detonated them at an Orion Township quarry.

"They were packed full of gunpowder," Fournier said.

Bowers said the radio station had not received any threats. Docking also said there was no indication why anyone would want to plant bombs in the radio tower.

The state police brought in tracking dogs to search the school to ensure that no bombs were in the building.

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