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By Maureen Aitken

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 from the muck, scares him silly, then plops 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 nicked and dined 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 de-

partment 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-5,322 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 as 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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■ Environmental advocates seek stronger laws to prevent wetlands development. But some developers say they blend land preservation with conscientious construction. E1.



INSIDE:

■ 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

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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 management division of the Plainwell district DNR office.

But Portage isn't the only area in Kalamazoo County feeling the wetland crunch.

The DNR recently released figures 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 vacant land is available than in Portage, 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 development opportunity for the uni-

versity and the CEO Council," says the report.

But the development would severely damage nearby wetlands and larger bodies of water such as Portage Creek, Asylum Lake and Little Asylum Lake, environmentalists say.

Street runoff of oil, gasoline and dirt would trickle into the wetlands and surrounding lakes, says Mark Hoffman, a concerned citizen and vocal opponent of the proposed business park.

Add probable street widening, car noise and fumes, and watch an oasis for fish, mallard ducks, Canada geese and even a great blue heron turn into an environmental ghost town, Hoffman warns.

"It'll also work to kill many of the habitants of the lakes and wetlands," 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

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any wetlands. The park's design could actually prevent seepage from other development from going into Asylum Lake, Burke said.

"With wise and careful development, 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 Resources.

The strongest wetlands-protection law in Michigan was adopted a little over a decade ago: the Goemaere-Anderson Wetlands Protection Act of 1979.

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 problem because of inadequate staffing.

"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 permits last year, not all of which are for wetlands construction, Rice said, and she expects the same amount to be processed this year.

"And people wonder why we're so busy," Rice said.

Statewide last year, of 6,149 permit applications for development on lakes, streams and wetlands, about 79 percent of the permits were granted, said Peg Boswick of the DNR. But only eight of the permits involved development 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 Oswald, no one would be let in to the county. The rich muckland here was what produced celery fields and helped secure jobs for incoming citizens.

Now, Oswald says, farmers are interested in reaching a compromise with environmentalists that will not break their pocketbooks.

And Josh Weiner, chief executive officer of the Meyer C. Weiner 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."