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## **Environmentalists decry Supercenter plan**

Jeff Tuttle Of the NEWS Staff

BANGOR - Naturalists here are preparing for a battle between the Sedge Wren and a Supercenter.

A plan to build a 224,000-square-foot **Wal-Mart** Supercenter on the corner of Gilman Road and Stillwater Avenue is running into some staunch opposition from area birdwatchers looking to protect the adjacent **Penjajawoc Marsh** and the endangered bird species that call it home.

"There is nowhere else in Bangor anything like this," Judy Kellogg Markowsky, director of the Maine Audubon Society's Fields Pond Nature Center, said as she walked along the old, gravel railroad bed that cuts through the 300-acre wetland. "There's so much here so many different kinds of birds and rare birds. "

The shallow water marsh is home to about 180 different bird species, 17 of which are on the state's endangered or threatened lists.

Among the rare birds that frequent the marsh are the Sedge Wren, a tiny songbird, and the Black Tern, a small gull-like bird whose population is declining nationwide, conservationists say.

The fact that the two species, rarely seen in the state, are nesting within the city limits is extraordinary, say local bird experts who frequent the area.

"Being out there, you have a sense in those fields and that marsh that you're far away from Bangor," said Ron Joseph, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who often takes children on field trips in the marsh.

"You should see the faces on the kids when they see a bald eagle fly over. They are in awe. "

And while bird-watchers may not be known as the most powerful lobby around, they do appear to be getting the attention of city and state officials.

Joseph, speaking as a private citizen, was among several people to address the Bangor Planning Board at a public hearing in September.

At that lengthy meeting, many residents asked the board to require the development to move farther away from the marshland the small stream that runs through it.

Although the board was originally scheduled to revisit the matter at its Oct. 3 meeting, city planners - at the developer's request - postponed the public hearing until either Oct. 17 or Nov. 7.

In asking for the extension, Widewater Stillwater Co., LLC, in a Wednesday letter to city planners, said the company needed more time to "address concerns" raised at the Sept. 5 hearing.

"We are working with the developer on some alternate plans so the project can go forward," **Wal-Mart** spokesman Keith Morris said Thursday.

In the original plan, the edge of the development would come within 70 and 100 feet of the protected area, a significant encroachment on the 250-foot buffer suggested by the Maine Department of Inland Fish and Wildlife.

Too close, say state officials.

The Penjajawoc - an American Indian word meaning "current raggedly falling down" - is considered a candidate to become a "significant wildlife habitat," according to Keel Kemper, a wildlife biologist with the MDIFW.

The designation would provide the area with additional protection under the Natural Resources Protection Act, he said.

"There's tons of things out there, some real gems and treats for experienced birders," said Kemper, noting that the 250-foot buffer was standard with high value wetland areas such as the Penjajawoc.

"No one's going to argue it's not a valuable wetland. "

Some opponents assert that Widewater is simply trying to skirt environmental laws to increase profits. But an Aug. 3 letter suggests that state wildlife officials actually reversed an earlier decision to allow the encroachment after it had determined that a portion of the wetland was not as valuable as the rest.

"We now know that this assessment of the stream habitat was incorrect," reads the letter from the MDIFW, which goes on to reaffirm the 250-foot buffer.

The proposed development would directly impact about 10,250 square feet of the wetland, according to Maine Department of Environmental Protection files.

The DEP, as well as the city's planning board, must approve the development's site plan before construction can begin. The DEP must also approve the developer's application for wetland intrusion.

Before acting on the applications, however, the DEP, will require Widewater to explain why the **Wal-Mart** project can't be moved closer to Gilman Road to spare the wetlands, according to an Aug. 30 letter from the state agency.

Widewater officials, at previous meetings, have suggested that the excess land on the parcel is slated for additional retail development, and moving the **Wal-Mart** would leave no room on the 27-acre lot for other stores along Gilman Road.

In its DEP application, a Widewater agent said the only alternative to the current plan is to discontinue the project.

The **Wal-Mart** Supercenter - some 5 acres of building with 996 parking spaces - would dwarf even the city's largest store, Home Depot with 137,000 square feet.

The new store would replace the current 121,000-square-foot **Wal-Mart** on Springer Drive that opened in 1992. It would include a grocery store, a tire and lubrication center and a garden center.

The new store is expected to add 250 jobs to the 300 positions at the current store. Seventy percent of those jobs are expected to be full time.

Despite the promise of new jobs and tax dollars to a community, **Wal-Mart** is no stranger to controversy.

Proposed **Wal-Mart** Supercenters elsewhere in Maine, including Ellsworth, Belfast, Palmyra and Rockland, have run into opposition, with residents questioning the need for such large stores and small businesses dreading the competition.

But while opponents cite varying reasons for disliking **Wal-Mart**, many of the birdwatchers in the Penjajawoc say they just want the Arkansas-based chain to give their feathered friends some space.

On a recent walk in the area, Bob Milardo, an avid birder, within minutes spotted a Pied-billed Grebe and a Northern Harrier, both considered of Northeast regional concern by conservationists.

With Filene's already clearly visible in the distance, Milardo said that he simply wants to make sure that nothing comes too close.

"If somebody wants to build a big store, I don't really care. I don't have to shop there," said Milardo, a professor of family relations at the University of Maine. "I just want them to put it somewhere else. This is a special place. "

**GRAPHIC:** The **Penjawoc Marsh**, which is home to about 180 different bird species, 17 of which are on the state's endangered or threatened lists, is adjacent to the site of a proposed **Wal-Mart** Supercenter on the corner of Gilman Road and Stillwater Avenue in Bangor. Wildlife activists want to protect the area from further development. (NEWS Photo by Kevin Bennett)