

Pleasant Prairie Plan Commission OK's request to create wetland mitigation bank on large plot

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PLEASANT PRAIRIE — With an eye toward possible future development, a Kenosha-based company began a painstaking process in 2015.

After a unanimous Plan Commission vote Monday night, that part of the journey is now complete.

Following a public hearing, the commission approved a request by SR Mills, CEO of Bear Real Estate Company, to create a wetland mitigation bank on 398 acres owned by the Mills family in the area between 91st and 104th streets.

There are about 200 acres remaining that could be developed, along with the mitigation bank, known as Barnes Prairie.

“My family’s owned this farm about 50 years,” Mills said during the meeting. “Over the years, we’ve added to it, buying additional properties. It’s been around longer than I have, but I have spent a lot of time there, and I think it’s a really special place with the ecology and the Barnes Creek running through it.

“It’s just a really neat area.”

According to EPA.gov, a mitigation bank is “a wetland, stream or other aquatic resource area that has been restored, established, enhanced or (in certain circumstances) preserved for the purpose of providing compensation for unavoidable impacts to aquatic resources permitted under ‘Section 404’ or a similar state or local wetland regulation.”

The process for declaring wetlands as a mitigation bank falls under the control of the Army Corps of Engineers and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Mills said.



There are three ways a developer can mitigate the disturbance of existing wetlands, and creating a bank is the most preferred method.

“They want you to mitigate those wetlands as close to the disturbance that you can,” Mills said.

Mills Holdings LLC initiated the feasibility study in 2015, and through investigation of the soil, vegetation and hydrology of the 398 acres, it was determined the area supported the restoration of historical wetlands. Mills said the cost to restore the area will range between \$4 and \$5 million, and the price tag to this point has exceeded \$500,000.

Mills said the study showed the site does not have vegetation, because it’s been farmed since the 1930s. Original photographs from the 1830s show the entire area was a wetland.

Restore, enhance, create

Mitigation banks are used to restore, enhance or create wetlands to offset development impacts to existing wetlands, according to the EPA website.

“What we’re really proposing here (are) the activities (that) aren’t much more than the farming that we do today,” Mills said. “We’re looking to adjust some farm ditches. We’re looking to adjust a lot of the tile, and we’re looking to plant it with native grasses.”

Agricultural tiles throughout the property will be dismantled, but Mills said he’s confident that work will not affect neighboring properties.

“They have the ability to come into these existing tiles and gradually limit the flow,” he said. “It’s not like, Day 1, we just see what happens. They’ll be able to go in and limit it. If we have water starting to back up in a certain area, we can adjust that flow accordingly and make sure it doesn’t back up to a neighbor’s property.”

There are about 95 acres on two different parcels within the newly-formed mitigation bank where it’s clear that water is an issue, Mills said.

“That is one of the areas on the site that is the wettest,” he said. “You can drive by any time in the spring and some days in the summer, looking north from 104th (Street), it’s a moat to get to that site. It’s really not developable, and we’re in the business of developing things, so if it was developable, we would develop it.”

Whatever happens down the road, Mills is confident having the mitigation bank in the center of the property is a win-win situation.

“Knowing that this is going to be a pristine, natural feature forever, that really is a positive, not only for the community, but for the ancillary developable sites that, over time, we will look to develop and move forward,” he said.