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Chesapeake developer starts bank for wetlands

By SCOTT HARPER, The Virginian-Pilot © July 4, 2005

CHESAPEAKE — It used to be a weedy, vacant lot where thousands of tires were illegally dumped.

Now, this 7.5-acre tract in Chesapeake, just off the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River near a chemical plant and a junk yard, is being converted into the state's first tidal wetlands bank.

Thomas Tye, a local developer and entrepreneur, is creating this modern environmental tool through a private venture, Chesapeake Land Development LLC.

When completed later this summer, the wetlands bank will help compensate for waterfront marshes lost to new piers, bulkheads, boat houses and other shoreline developments.

"He's definitely blazing a trail," Traycie West-Pinkoski, an environmental engineer for the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, said of Tye's enterprise.

The commission and other state, local and federal regulators have approved the project after two years of consideration.

The bank, as planned, will work this way:

Say a developer wants to build a new marina that harms 1,000 square feet of tidal wetlands. He will need to obtain government permits, which likely will include a requirement to pay for or replace the wetlands in some way.

If no other alternatives are found, the developer might buy a 1,000-square-foot "credit" from the bank, at \$8 per cubic foot, or for \$8,000. (At Tye's rate, an acre's worth of credit would cost about \$348,000.)

The bank helps plug a hole in the government's current conservation strategy.

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For years, the government has lacked options for replacing tidal wetlands. According to state estimates, 132 acres of reedy, waterfront marshes have been ruined across coastal Virginia since 1993 , but only 20 acres have been replaced.

Given that Virginia and the rest of the nation are committed to an environmental policy of "no net loss" of wetlands, officials now are anxious to reverse such trends.

Tye's bank can be used only for shoreline construction activities along the lower James River, the Nansemond River, the Elizabeth River, the Pagan River and the Warwick River.

When all the wetlands in his bank are accounted for, the seven acres will remain as they are , to be monitored and maintained by Tye for 10 years . They never can be developed, under a side agreement with the Elizabeth River Project, an environmental group.

"The concept is great, and pretty much is a no-brainer," said Walter Priest , a wetlands expert with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who has analyzed the bank project.

"It's a very good thing that entrepreneurs like Mr. Tye are getting involved in this, and is something I'm sure we'll see more of in the coming years," Priest added.

The bank is especially relevant today since the state this spring passed a new policy directing that all tidal-wetland losses be compensated for; previously, only projects harming more than 1,000 square feet included mitigation requirements.

Tye's project is being built on a tract off Bainbridge Boulevard and Libertyville Road in the South Norfolk section of Chesapeake. The land is sandwiched between the Harbour North Apartments and Earl's Used Auto Parts .

NOVA Chemicals is located just up the street, and cars on Interstate 64 can be heard buzzing past.

Tye now is excavating tons of dirt to lower the property, then will cut ditches through it to allow for tidal flooding from nearby Mains Creek , a branch of the Elizabeth River.

He will plant 25,000 Spartina reeds to complete his new wetland but will leave standing two small groves of trees for birds and small wildlife.

He also has collected an estimated 20,000 junk tires, which are piled in a corner of the lot next to his neighbor, the salvage yard. The state is supposed to pick up and dispose of this mountain of rubber as part of its campaign to eradicate illegal tire dumps, Tye said.

Tye bought the property six years ago and initially wanted to develop apartments there.

But he soon realized that building apartments next to an auto salvage yard might not be too smart.

So he started looking for alternative uses and came up with the idea for a tidal wetlands bank.

Only one other wetlands bank exists in Virginia, in King and Queen County . But it has not been permitted by the Army Corps of Engineers, officials said, and is located far enough inland that officials consider it a tidal-freshwater bank.

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