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Wetlands Case Study: Gander Mountain, Blaine

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All wetlands are not created equal. Wetland delineations are not created equal either.

“You’re wasting your time.” That’s what one wetland official told Paul Tucci of Oppidan Investment Company after he explained his intent to develop a 15-acre parcel in Blaine. Three wetland delineations conducted on the parcel during the past 15 years had all concluded that wetlands covered much of the critical central portion of the site. An earlier developer had walked away from the parcel due to the predominance of wetlands on the site.

When Tucci called Ron Peterson, Westwood’s Environmental Services Director, who at that time was President of Peterson Environmental Consulting, Tucci’s vision for a Gander Mountain store on the parcel looked like a losing battle.

A few months and a re-analysis later, Peterson concluded that substantial land use alterations had long ago removed wetland hydrology from the site. The entire parcel had been effectively drained by historic agricultural activities in the area. The drained condition was perpetuated by subsequent urbanization and development of stormwater management infrastructure. The Coon Creek Watershed District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ultimately agreed.

Where several others had seen wetlands, Peterson and his staff saw the misinterpretation of wetland hydrology indicators that are required by Army Corps delineation protocols. The site contained no jurisdictional wetland. No wetland permits or mitigation were needed. The Blaine Gander Mountain opened on schedule.



Re-analysis of previously delineated wetlands demonstrated that historic drainage activities had removed the hydrology necessary to sustain wetlands. The former wetlands were no longer subject to state and federal regulations.

Wetlands: Now You See Them... Now You Don’t

Wetland delineators don’t make wetlands magically appear or disappear. Rather, a rigorous analysis of hydrologic indicators is used to determine whether wetland hydrology actually exists and, if so, to what extent. Too often, delineators presume the presence of jurisdictional hydrology without an adequate technical basis. An appropriate analysis considers:

- Sources of hydrologic modification, such as ditches, tiles, surface water diversion, catchment area changes, and dewatering;
- Review of adjoining properties, the hydrologic setting, and related elevations and infrastructure;

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- Indicators of organic soil desiccation, which occurs in the absence of sufficient hydrology; and
- Plant communities that are inconsistent with the type of native hydric soils observed.

Regulatory agencies typically assume that historic wetlands have wetland hydrology until proven drained. The level of investigation and analysis that is required varies from site to site; sometimes shallow groundwater monitoring with electronic wells is required to achieve an accurate wetland delineation. Whether a site requires a routine delineation or a more advanced analysis, delineators need to have a thorough understanding of hydrology criteria and protocols to make accurate assessments based on sound professional judgment.

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