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Bass Pro Shops says no to wetlands, but GOP still backs bill

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Gov. Scott Walker and legislative leaders said Friday they would move quickly to enact a bill that would allow a developer to build on a wetland near Lambeau Field, even as the retailer envisioned for the development announced that it would not build on such a site.

Walker's comments came after Bass Pro Shops issued a statement saying the company does not favor building a store where wetlands are present.

The Missouri-based retailer had earlier discussed with a developer building a store at Highway 41 and Lombardi Ave. in Ashwaubenon near the home of the Green Bay Packers.

The development has been slowed over wetlands concerns, prompting the Republican governor to write a bill this month that would allow a developer to sidestep a standard water quality review by the Department of Natural Resources.

The bill cleared an Assembly committee Thursday, after language was added to narrow the focus of the bill to appease conservation groups.

The Assembly plans to vote on the bill Wednesday.

The measure angered environmental and conservation groups, who said it effectively negated the rights of citizens to challenge such cases. They also said it amounted to legislation that helped a single developer, who has long contributed to candidates in both parties.

The battle highlights the tension in Madison over environmental regulation and how those decisions can affect the state's economy. It also underscores Walker's willingness to employ the legislative process with a seldom-used tactic to help a specific company avoid a potentially protracted state review process.

Walker told reporters Friday that he still wants to proceed with the bill despite Bass Pro Shops' position.

"I think if we still had swift action, I think they'd reconsider," he said.

Walker plans to call Bass Pro Shops officials in the coming days to encourage the company to come to Wisconsin, Walker aide Cullen Werwie said.

Bass Pro Shops is believed to be the retailer that Neenah businessman John F. Bergstrom is developing for the site. Bergstrom, a car dealer and member of the executive committee of the Packers, had been asked by the team to pursue a commercial project to complement the drawing power of Lambeau.

Preliminary discussions

Company spokesman Larry Whiteley said Bass Pro Shops had "exploratory conversations" with the developer, but cautioned that the company wasn't canceling plans for the project because no deal had ever been struck.

He said the Packers were familiar with Bass Pro Shops' store in a development near the New England Patriots' Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass.

"We were unaware of any wetlands issues and have not and will not be in favor of doing anything to harm wetlands, wherever they might be," Whiteley said in a statement.

In an interview, Whiteley declined to say whether the company no longer had an interest in Green Bay, saying only: "We don't build on wetlands."

In a statement, Paul Kent, an attorney for Bergstrom, said: "This isn't about a specific retailer - this is about creating jobs, building a destination that will bring two to three million new visitors to Green Bay.

"The need for the legislation remains critical to the redevelopment effort."

Republicans have generally favored the legislation, saying that Bergstrom was taking steps to avoid destruction of many of the wetlands on the site and had offered to build or improve more nearby, a concept known as wetland mitigation.

The dispute began when the Green Bay-based staff of the DNR questioned whether the project met state water quality standards for wetlands, concluding the project would have a negative effect on wetland habitat.

The project was approved by DNR administrators in Madison.

But the Wisconsin Wetlands Association challenged the decision, despite an agreement by Bergstrom to make several modifications.

Because of the challenge, Bergstrom must go through a judicial-like proceeding known as a contested-case hearing, and he was advised by Kent that the proceeding could take months. Walker's bill would have sidestepped that process.

Four Democratic lawmakers sent a letter to John L. Morris, founder of Bass Pro Shops, on Wednesday expressing their concerns about the environmental effects of the project.

Republicans blamed the letter for killing the deal.

"Liberal Democrats in Madison scored a death blow to northeast Wisconsin's economy by winning a battle for the far left agenda," Assembly Majority Leader Scott Suder (R-Abbotsford) said in a statement.

Bass Pro Shops typically employ 300 full-time workers.

One of the letter writers, Rep. Brett Hulsey (D-Madison), said part of the development could be moved back 40 feet to avoid the wetlands. That would end the controversy and allow the project to proceed, he said.

"If the bill passes next Wednesday, no Fortune 500 company will want to touch this because it's dirty," he said.

Rep. Nick Milroy (D-South Range) said the review process should have been allowed to play out.

"I favor the development, but there has to be a proper procedure," Milroy said.

But Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) noted the project was in a heavily developed area and would probably be developed whether Bass Pro comes or not.

"I don't see any reason to really pull back," Fitzgerald said.

Known for stewardship

In a statement, the wetlands association said Walker and Bergstrom "focused on using political capital to circumvent the law. Yet neither of them considered the environmental ethic and business practices of the company that they wanted to bring to Green Bay."

Former DNR Secretary George Meyer said he wasn't surprised by Bass Pro Shops' announcement. Meyer, executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, said the company's reputation of stewardship doesn't condone wetland destruction.

Meyer said Bergstrom's offer to restore wetlands in another location is laudable, but only as a last resort. He said local landscapes are better served by keeping wetlands intact.

Sen. Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay) said he recently toured the property.

"This is no wetland. I walked the site and I thought, 'This whole hubbub is about this site?' Come on!" Cowles said.

Thomas Content of the Journal Sentinel contributed to this story.

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