

GOP wetlands bill clears Assembly with key amendment

Posted on Friday, Feb 16, 2018

The Assembly today signed off on a bill to roll back permitting requirements for certain urban and rural wetlands on a 58-39 vote.

The chamber also approved a new substitute amendment on a voice vote aligning it with the Senate version of the bill that cleared a committee last week.

Dems, though, lined up in opposition to the bill, arguing during some two-and-a-half hours of debate it would usurp local control, hurt tourism in the state, worsen flooding in urban areas and unnecessarily endanger wetlands that could be acting as important wildlife ecosystems.

“The bill indeed does put our sporting heritage at risk by jeopardizing the wetlands that many of our creatures that we like hunting and fishing live in,” said Rep. Jonathan Brostoff, D-Milwaukee.

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In addition to all 35 Dems, the bill [also saw opposition from](#) GOP Reps. Joel Kitchens, Todd Novak, Kevin Petersen and Travis Tranel.

That new amendment to the bill would set mitigation requirements for the filling of certain urban wetlands. Specifically, it would require developers to mitigate after filling more than 10,000 square feet of an urban wetland — a notable departure from the previous Assembly version of the bill, which would not have required mitigation in urban areas when up to an acre of wetland is filled.

Bill co-author Majority Leader Jim Steineke called the sub a “reasonable compromise,” saying the bill would still get at the authors’ goals of streamlining the permitting process for some developers. In all, he said, the amended bill would

affect 2 percent of the more than 5 million acres of wetlands in the state, leaving in place the protections for the majority of non-federal wetlands.

The change would help address the cases where developers have to face long delays when looking to fill a wetland and build on the land that ultimately drives up the total cost of the project and “costing the consumer in the long run,” he said.

And the Kaukauna Republican pushed back against Dems’ concerns surrounding flooding, saying any of the developments would still have to comply with local stormwater regulations.

Meanwhile, Rep. Adam Jarchow, who voted for the bill, knocked the effort as a “huge missed opportunity for Wisconsin.”

Although he thought of the first version of the bill as perhaps the “very best piece of legislation we may pass in this body since Act 10,” Jarchow, R-Balsam Lake, said the legislation he voted on today “is nothing like that bill that I was so excited about.”

The bill that passed the chamber today represents a significantly scaled back version of the original legislation, which initially sought to exempt all state wetlands from permitting requirements.

Jarchow blamed the Senate for pairing back the effort, saying the chamber “stood in the way once again of something that could have been significant progress.”

Under the amended legislation, the following state wetlands from permitting requirements: filling up to 1 acre per parcel of wetland in an urban area; filling up to 3 acres per parcel of wetlands in agricultural areas; and filling artificial wetlands.

The amended bill would also would require the Department of Natural Resources to establish a property development grant program for nonprofits to increase public access or awareness of a wetland, or promote habitat in wetland areas; and it would create a nine-member wetland study council housed within the agency.

The bill now heads to the Senate, where members are planning to vote on it Tuesday.