

# Reality-based Regulations

## Citizen planning groups working to protect water

By **Dave Kellam**

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KINGSTON — Planning board and conservation commission members in Kingston are "getting real" when it comes to protecting water quality.

The citizen planning groups are working with the Rockingham Planning Commission and New Hampshire Soil Consultants, Inc. to draft a town ordinance that will prescribe specific development-free zones, called buffers, around Kingston's wetlands. The extent of the buffers required will depend on how important a particular wetland is in supporting the ecology and water resources of the area.

Kingston's "one size does not fit all" approach is unique because most buffer ordinances in the Seacoast opt for one standard buffer width, regardless of the quality of the wetland it protects. But it is important to take a close look at each situation.

"Simply put, all wetlands are not created equal," said Glenn Greenwood, planner for the Rockingham Planning Commission. "Some wetlands are very critical to the protection of water quality or wildlife populations, while others don't function that well. Those poorly functioning wetlands don't need to have the same level of protection as highly functional ones.

Evaluation of a wetland's quality depends on a number of factors. Adele Fiorillo of NHSC described the evaluation process in Kingston.

"Myself and colleague Sherrie Davis recommended that the functions or values of a wetland be determined using a method based on one developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers," Fiorillo said. "Through examining aerial photography and doing field assessments, we suggested that each wetland area be evaluated for a variety of functions, such as wildlife habitat, flood control, and water quality protection."

The planning team then recommended a buffer width that adequately protects the most important wetland function.

"Research shows that different buffer widths provide protection to different wetland functions," Fiorillo said. "For instance, to protect wildlife habitat, a buffer needs to be wider than one that only provides flood control."

Armed with this evaluation system, town planning officials have used a point system to set appropriate buffer limits throughout the community.

Kingston's Planning Board Chairman Glenn Coppelman said he thinks this is the fairest way to balance natural resources protection and development needs.

"This type of science-based ordinance gives developers options when looking at a parcel of land," he

said. "They can build closer to wetlands that are of lesser importance, but must maintain larger buffers next to critical ones. It exemplifies the common sense zoning approach that Kingston is striving for. We simply want to make sure that natural resources that significantly benefit the greater community are not degraded by development."

The project to develop regulations for buffers was made possible through funding from the New Hampshire Estuaries Project. The program provides assistance to communities on a wide range of regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to natural resources protection.

Eye on our Estuaries is an educational column initiated by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project about coastal watershed issues. The NHEP is a collaborative program involving governmental agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, businesses and the public to protect, enhance and monitor the environmental quality of the state's coastal bays and rivers. NHEP is funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For details, visit [www.nhep.unh.edu](http://www.nhep.unh.edu).

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