

Pratt project site shifts

By Shaun Zinck szinck@beloitdailynews.com | Posted: Thursday, February 19, 2015 4:00 pm

The Pratt Industries project in Beloit has changed location after the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources wanted to do its own study on the site to ensure protection of wetlands.

City Manager Larry Arft said the site did have wetlands to the north of the railroad, but the land Pratt wanted to use has been a farm field for over 100 years, and isn't a wetland. However, the DNR believed the land fit the definition in state statute of a wetland, Arft said.

"It's a pretty aggressive definition in order to allow them to incorporate as much land as possible," Arft said. "We knew that. We brought in a consultant last September and did a delineated study and marked off the farm land."

He said the city was aware from the beginning there could be some abatement of the wetlands needed, and budgeted \$200,000 in the development agreement for that purpose.

"We went to the DNR to get them abated, but they refused," he said. "We were quite shocked. We started with a meeting with the DNR to show them the site. Even though it was slightly snow covered you could still see it was a farm field not wetlands. One of the people from DNR did come to the site and told us right up front that the DNR wasn't going to accept any of the work we had done. They would redo all of it. That would have killed the project for the 2015 construction season."

Pratt plans to build a 350,000-square-foot facility in Beloit that could create up to 140 new jobs. The Georgia-based company originally picked out a piece of land at the corner of Gateway Boulevard and Turtle Town Hall Road near the railroad tracks, which was a requirement when Pratt was searching for a site.

Pratt manufactures corrugated packaging materials, and is the world's largest privately-held, 100 percent recycled paper and packaging company. The company wanted to build the facility starting this spring, and be fully operational by the spring of 2016.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers eventually took authority over the site, which Arft said was unusual due to the location not being near large waters.

"That essentially killed the site," Arft said. "It would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and a couple of years to get permits through the Corps of Engineers."

Erin Gordon, communication specialist for the DNR, said in an emailed statement to the Daily News the department was unaware that the lot was going to be developed until mid-January after a report was submitted that summarized the wetlands on the property.

“The report indicates wetlands are present on the property,” Gordon said. “A non-assured delineator completed the work. The DNR determined this delineation required a review. The DNR also must complete a functional values assessment of the wetlands. These two actions require a field visit when plants are growing at the site.”

Gordon said the DNR told Pratt and the city in early February that it would work with them on the permit process once the “growing season had started.”

“The DNR didn’t tell Pratt or the City that development couldn’t occur at the site because of wetlands,” Gordon said.

The city was able to move the site south about two miles to the corner of Colley Road and Gateway Boulevard, Arft said. The permit process will be completed by the spring, and Pratt is hoping to begin construction in April.

The Beloit City Council and the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation will hold a joint meeting on Monday to amend the development agreement to reflect the change in location. Arft said the new site won’t have railroad access, however, Pratt Industries is aware of the change and has agreed to it.

“We were very pleased with that,” Arft said. “After the reception we got with the DNR we could have lost the whole project.”

The total incentives the city offered Pratt was worth about \$3.8 million, which included a \$200,000 cash grant from the GBEDC, and a \$350,000 matching grant from the city to build a rail spur. Since the rail spur won’t be built, the city still plans to apply for a Transportation Economic Assistance grant from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to rebuild Colley Road.

Arft said the city will have to continue working with the DNR in order to get the original site approved for development. He said the city has not met again with DNR staff, but he is hoping to meet soon.

“We have to work out a solution so we can use this property,” Arft said. “There is no reason why this property can’t be developed. There is plenty of ground to develop without bothering the true wetlands.”