

DEVELOPMENT THREAT TO EAGLES

The Nonn development project poses a real threat to keeping eagles in the downtown area of Prairie du Sac. Part of the problem in communicating this threat has been a misunderstanding of language terms. Part of the problem has been that facts rarely change entrenched decisions. As one of the local eagle experts, I am writing to clarify some of the confusion that has been voiced. The Nonn development site-map in this article shows the basis of the concern about the threat to keeping eagles in the downtown area.

This discussion cites the Comprehensive Plan because it's been one source of confusion about the meaning of the 250 (two hundred and fifty) foot buffer. (A copy of the Plan can be seen at: www.vandewalle.com/work/wipsauk.) The Comprehensive Plan shows on Map 10b that the Nonn development site is one with Building Limitations. The reason this land is so defined is found in the Plan (page 107). It cites a "250 foot buffer around eagle foraging, perching, and roosting areas, per the Ferry Bluff Eagle Council".

The proximity to the foraging area is the only condition that applies to the development site qualifying it to be designated as one with Building Limitations. **THE 250-FOOT BUFFER IS THE LAND BOUNDED BY THE BLUE LINE ON THE SITE-MAP.** The location of this Blue Line extends from the west bank of the river because the foraging area IS the river. To clarify any confusion, the foraging area means where eagles hunt for fish.

As some have noted, the Plan states that a variety of developments are permissible at this site. But the Plan policy statement (page 108) also states: "Work collectively...to ASSURE that any development that is allowed on lands with Building Limitations does not negatively affect...wildlife habitat.". Assure means to remove doubt; to make certain. This is the stated standard.

This policy is reinforced by the Natural Resource Objective stated in the Plan (page 58): "Preserve...wildlife habitat (particularly wintering bald eagles)..". The letter and spirit of the Plan is quite clear: Develop lands with Building Limitations in a way that is consistent with keeping eagles.

The 2005 Plan further says (page 108): "Where development is proposed in or near lands with Building Limitations, determine the exact boundaries based on the features that define those areas." An additional key feature of defined concern (within the Blue Line) is the distance to the trees eagles PERCH in--trees on Eagle Island (and trees across the river) where they sit watching for fish. This feature is the Red Line on the site-map. The area from this Red Line to the river is shaded Light Red. Let me clarify what this Red Line means and where it comes from.

Everyone knows that you cannot just walk up to a bird and grab it. They fly away. The closest distance you can normally get before they fly is called the FLUSHING DISTANCE. The flushing distance varies for each kind of bird: for Robins it may be 20 feet, but for Eagles it's 750 (seven hundred and fifty) feet. Eagles perched in trees on Eagle Island and across river are flushed (scared away) by people going into Graf Park (and below the Eagle Overlook) today, just like they did twenty years ago. That is, the Red Line is based on the flushing distance known from the downtown eagle viewing area.

THE RED LINE MARKS THE 750-FOOT FLUSHING DISTANCE TO THE NEAREST PERCHING TREE USED BY EAGLES. People seen on the Water Street-side of the Red Line will not flush most perched Eagles. The Red Line is the distance needed to ASSURE that eagles will not be flushed (scared away) from the downtown viewing area. That is, how Eagles respond to the same human activity largely depends on which side of the Red Line that activity occurs. (The curved shape of the Red Line is due to the location of Eagle Island.)

The Red Line on the site-map is the critically important flushing distance for this, or any alternative proposal. The downtown hosted Eagles in the past because nearly all human-activity inside this Red Line was effectively screened from the view of Eagles. The new development proposal will change this. Seeing where the three proposed buildings are located relative to the Red Line on the site-map says much about their anticipated impacts on eagles downtown.

For example, the impact of human activity in the restaurant is not very likely to scare Eagles from the downtown area because the site-map shows that it is on the Water Street side of the Red Line. Commercial activity along Water Street for the other two buildings will also not flush Eagles: the sidewalk is outside the Red Line, and all human activity will be screened from Eagles perched in trees along the river by the buildings themselves. These are not major sticking points with the proposal.

The major threat of the Nonn proposal to Eagles is the 24 two-bedroom condos facing the river. The windows and balconies of these two buildings are seen on the site-map to be located well inside the Red Line. It follows that inadequately screened activity by residents living in these condos will flush Eagles from the downtown area. With so many people, the level of disturbance could easily cause eagles to abandon the downtown completely. No one knows if darkened glass, or ongoing 'education' of residents will help. Not a single learning example of people living so close to a congregation of Eagles has been found or offered up.

The developer cannot be faulted for his initial conception of the development plan. This occurred long before he became aware of the flushing distance of eagles in April (at Graf Park and near the Overlook). But there have been misrepresentations of 'distances' in every public meeting since. The resulting confusion has been used to convince people the project won't have an impact, but it won't fool Eagles or anyone else in the future. Unless all human activity within the Red shaded region (inside the Red Line) is completely screened from Eagles there will be few, if any, Eagles downtown.

The public should hold Village officials and the developers responsible for the consequences of their future decisions. As it stands now, no one can offer any assurance that this proposal will also work for Eagles, as required by the 2005 Comprehensive Plan.

Rich Van