

Taking the green out of conservation

▼ Political opponents battle over funds for Site M, the largest piece of publicly owned land in the state.

BY JOSH CHETWYND

Politicians faced with diminishing natural resources are under pressure to consider conservation measures, but Gov. Jim Edgar's attempt to grapple with Illinois' environmental future has been stymied this election year.

Criticized for overlooking ecological concerns during his 1990 campaign, Edgar purchased what is currently the largest parcel of publicly owned land in Illinois.

But his proposal to develop that land has been stalled in the Democrat-controlled Illinois House as he is about to face re-election on Nov. 8. Edgar, a Republican, faces Democrat Dawn Clark Netsch.

Proponents of Edgar's plan say its failure is an example of partisan politics. Others disagree, citing budgetary constraints.

Lots of land

Site M, a 24.3-square-mile area 30 miles northwest of Springfield in Cass County, is the centerpiece of Edgar's plan, called Conservation 2000. The sprawling site was a large investment for the state, which bought the land last year from Commonwealth Edison for \$8.75 million. Since the purchase, Site M has cost the Department of Conservation \$298,600 to maintain.

Conservation 2000, which was introduced in Edgar's March budget, set aside \$100 million over six years, including \$6.5 million in 1995, for environmental projects. Over the six-year period, the total Conservation 2000 fund would be used for land acquisition, soil conservation, habitat preservation and environmental education.

Of the first year's \$6.5 million, \$2.5 million would go to Site M. That portion would be used to re-establish fish and wildlife species, divert water to create a lake, develop horseback riding and hiking trails and build an education center at the site.

The state would earmark one-eighth of 1 percent of state sales tax to pay for the total initiative.

Site M is full of forests, pastures, prairies, ponds, farmland and archaeological sites. It is the home of the endangered Indiana bat and one of the few places to see the rare white lady's slipper orchid. It has 7,400 acres of farm fields, 3,000 acres of pastures, 5,100 acres of forest and more than 100 ponds.

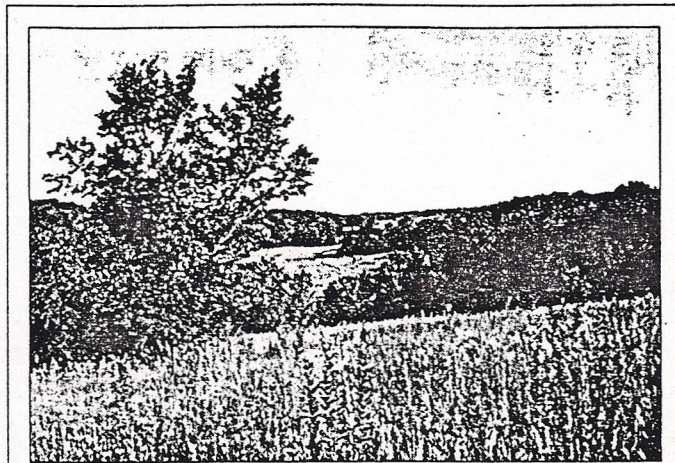
In a park system that owns less than 5 percent of Illinois' land, Site M is one of the state's few sizable ecologically diverse locations.

"The Department [of Conservation] sees Site M as a chance to manage an entire watershed area that is a large ecosystem," said the Department of Conservation's Anne Mueller. "It could be a showpiece where Illinois residents could see many different habitats."

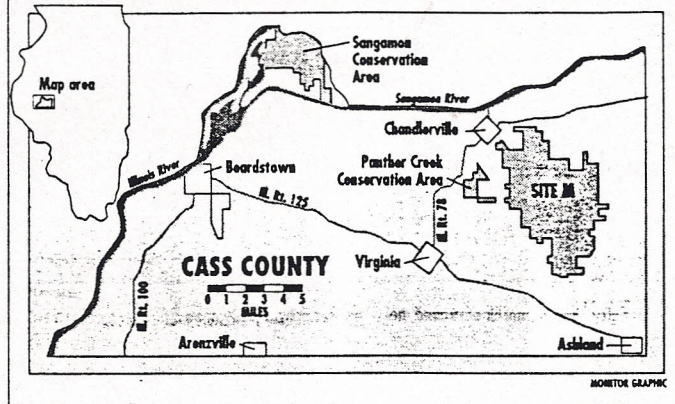
While the tillable land is leased out to farmers and some hunting programs are in place, most of the site has been left undeveloped.

Claudia Emken of the Conservation Department estimates that without the funding it might be five to seven years before the department can make any substantial changes that visitors would notice.

When Conservation 2000 was first introduced, it looked as though the bill would face little opposition in the state legislature. In May, the



Site M, a diverse 24.3-square-mile conservation location, is facing an uncertain future.



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initiative got bipartisan support in the state Senate, passing 58-1. But it was held up in the House by Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago), missing the chance to be included in this year's budget.

The result is that the development of the site will be limited at least until after the governor's race.

Not enough money

A spokesman for Madigan said the speaker believes the state's money can be spent more wisely.

"This bill was a p.r. gimmick," said Madigan's press secretary Steve Brown. "Under existing law, if the Department of Conservation wants to do anything in this bill, it can do it. With \$140 million in Medicaid bills, he [Madigan] just felt there were more important bills to call."

Emken, who said that supporters of the bill had enough votes in the House for passage if it had been called, believes Brown is missing the initiative's point.

"We could shift money to cover these programs but we would have to shut down some state parks we are trying to maintain," Emken said. "We can only do so much with the money we have."

In the budget passed in July, the department received \$3.4 million less than Edgar proposed. Its 1995 budget is \$212.2 million.

Emken and other supporters of Conservation 2000 believe the bill's failure had nothing to do with the value of the initiative.

"This bill was held up because of politics," said Ill. Rep. Clement Balanoff (D-Chicago). "With the governor's race this year, it wouldn't look so good if this, his big environmental package passed."

Brown countered by saying that supporters could have called the bill for a vote. However, 60 of the 118 representatives are needed to pull a bill from committee. There are 51 Republicans in the House.

It would be difficult for Democrats to cross Madigan, one of the key players in doling out campaign funds, according to Virginia Scott of the non-partisan Illinois Environmental Council.

"This bill really put a lot of Democratic members in a jam," said Scott, the council's executive director. "They could tell it was a worthwhile bill but were pressured by the leadership to pull support."

While Balanoff said he was not personally pressured, he agreed that party politics is a problem.

"The bottom line is we have to stop worrying about what party people are in," said Balanoff, a Democrat who supported Conservation 2000. "This is an issue that affects the whole state and it should have been voted on."

Emken added that the bill was hurt because it lacked any sexy issue to sell to the public.

"This isn't a big splashy kind of initiative, there is nothing [in the bill] you could go to a politician and point to," Emken said. "It's silly, when I go out, I can't tell which deer is a Democrat and which is Republican, but their fate is decided by that."

But even lobbyists have questioned the development of Site M and Conservation 2000's intentions.

The Illinois Environmental Council is concerned that, in its effort to make Site M a tourist attraction, the state might overlook ecological issues.

"We understand the concept of multiple use of state parks, but we have concerns about how large a lake the Department of Conservation wants to create to attract boating," Scott said. "Also, we want to be sure that crop land is not placed too close to streams because that can cause erosion. But we are confident the department will make efforts to modify these problems."

Both the Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Association of Realtors initially opposed the Conservation 2000 bill because of issues unrelated to Site M.

"Philosophically, we have reservations with the state of Illinois being in the business of owning land and farming," said Ray Payne, a lobbyist for the Farm Bureau. "We feel that the Conservation 2000 bill gives the state broad ability to buy land."

Similarly, the Association of Realtors was concerned that the bill would allow the state to force residents to sell their land.

Supporters of the initiative responded by changing the bill's language. As it is now, the state will only approach "willing sellers." With the change, the Realtors' association dropped its opposition. But the Farm Bureau remains leery.

"When you're talking about willing buyers, [the state] can still put pressure on people," Payne said. "Although it may be considered voluntary, it is not."

Payne said that the Farm Bureau, which represents 75 percent of farmers in the state, is willing to remove its opposition if language in the bill is further refined. But Payne vows to lobby against the bill until then.

Election-year pressure

Convincing lobbyists of the bill's value has been difficult for Edgar's administration, but finding a way to deal with the political aspects of the issue may be more important in this election year, observers believe.

"People are more aware of the environment nowadays," said Deanne Benos, assistant account executive at Agenda Communications, a public policy management firm. "They would notice if a big environmental bill passed."

While Benos said crime, education and taxes are the biggest issues, the environment is always a voter concern.

Brown of Madigan's staff insisted that this was not a political issue.

"You have seen Edgar's commercials. His focus is on crime initiatives and law and order," Brown said. "I don't think Edgar would focus on this issue."

Though she has not commented on Conservation 2000, Netsch, Edgar's Democratic opponent, said she supports legislation to create special funding for wildlife.

Meanwhile, the Department of Conservation and Edgar's office said they will continue to push the bill in the next legislative session.

"Politics have played a part in stopping the bill so far," Mueller said. "We have not given up yet." ▼

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