

LOCAL

Builders relieved turtle is no longer protected

By Claudia Torrens
DAILY NEW STAFF

They are small critters, not much bigger than five inches long, but they have been at the center of a debate among state officials, developers and environmentalists.

On Tuesday, the state Fisheries and Wildlife Board yanked the spotted turtle off its list of "special concern" species, sparking another round of discussion.

Developers - who in some cases saw their multimillion-dollar projects shrink or disappear because of delays caused by the presence of the small reptile - welcomed the news.

"This will save me some time and money when it comes to doing extraordinary preparations because of the turtles," said J. Michael Norton of Green View Realty in Bellingham. "It is a relief for me because I won't have to go through all that extra effort."

That effort might include building turtle ramps for the slopes of the retention ponds of his project in Holliston, the Cedar Ridge Estates complex. The town or the state could be concerned with the slopes being too steep and the turtles needing ramps. Now that the spotted turtle is not a species of special concern anymore, that may not happen.

Norton said the state's deci-

sion also may save him longer discussions with Holliston's Conservation Commission and the possibility of having to change his project to relocate space for the turtles.

South Natick Hills, a 300-unit housing project proposed in Natick, will be built in a 52-acre area that has parts considered by the state as potential habitat for spotted turtles.

Developers have been planning to leave 15 acres as a conservation area just for the turtle, but now things could change. Ted Gowdy, land entitlement manager for Pulte Homes of New England, said yesterday he does not know the consequences of the state's decision.

"That protected area may be adjusted to protect the salamander," said Gowdy. Four-toed salamanders, a species of "special concern," also have been found at the Natick site.

The state has voted the turtle off the list because it is widespread and common enough to no longer qualify, said Henry Woolsey, program manager of the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species program. Woolsey said the turtle has been documented in 259 towns and has been found in more than 960 locations.

"We have no real documentation to show a decline in population. In fact, what we have observed is a 500 percent increase

in known locations," Woolsey said.

Developers could be affected by the state's decision because the animal was the most frequent in the state's environmental reviews, he said.

Some environmentalists, however, have concerns.

Bryan Windmiller, an environmental consultant and research biologist for Hyla Ecological Services in Concord, said the population of spotted turtles likely will decline.

"The state's decision is reasonable, but I am concerned because I think there is no good information on the likely decline of the turtle," Windmiller said.

Natural Heritage should compile more information on the number of turtles and the sites where it is found, said Windmiller.

The environmentalist, who also is a member of the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Advisory Committee, said the committee received 90 e-mails and letters from environmental groups opposing the removal of the turtle from the list.

Some of those letters or e-mails were sent by the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions and the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Developers, however, said they will be able to breathe again.

Ron Roux, co-founder of Hallmark Cos., abandoned his proposed \$50 million Sanctuary Golf and Country Club in Hopkinton four years ago because seven spotted turtles were found on the 257-acre parcel where he wanted to build.

He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

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