

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PROPOSED WETLAND REGULATIONS**What is a wetland?**

A wetland is generally characterized by three key features: (1) the area is saturated or inundated with water; (2) that water is present enough of the time to support plants that are adapted to wet conditions; and (3) the area has soil that has been affected by the continued presence of water. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs, and similar areas. It is important to point out that wetlands do not all have standing water present at all, or even most, times of the year. Wetlands are regulated in Bellevue as critical areas.

Why are wetlands considered critical areas?

Wetlands are integral features of Bellevue's urban landscape and the local hydrologic cycle. Wetlands reduce floods, contribute to stream flows, and improve water quality. Wetlands also provide habitat for birds, amphibians and other wildlife. Each wetland provides various beneficial functions, but not all wetlands perform all functions, nor do they perform all functions equally well. Urbanization in the watershed diminishes the function of individual wetlands by increasing stormwater volume, reducing runoff quality, isolating wetlands from other habitats, and decreasing vegetation.

How do I determine if there is a wetland on my property?

A determination of whether a site contains a wetland or wetland buffer can be made in several ways. Limited information on hand at the City can be used as a preliminary indication that a site has a wetland.

Additionally, when an application for development is received, city staff can also visit the site and look for key indications of a wetland. If a wetland is suspected to exist on a site, an appropriate professional must examine the site and prepare a report describing the wetland before any development is approved for that site. Based on the characteristics and functions of the wetland, it is placed into one of four categories, based on the Washington State Wetland Rating System for Western Washington developed by the Washington State Department of Ecology.

What happens if I have a wetland on my property?

The city currently regulates sites with wetlands, so your property has been subject to some special rules since 1987, when the City first adopted regulations about critical areas. Some changes are suggested with these amendments that might impact the way you use your property. Whether or not you will be impacted by the proposed changes in the regulations depends on what you are planning on doing with your site, as described below:

- **Do I have to do anything if I'm not proposing a change to my existing house, patio, deck or landscaping?**

No, the regulations only apply when you are making a change to the improvements on your property. You may even continue maintaining landscaping or lawn area within the wetland buffer. The city is developing certain incentives to encourage property owners to enhance these areas on their property, but those programs will be voluntary.

- **What if I want to do work in a critical area?**

Please contact the Land Use help desk at 425-452-4188 before beginning any enhancement projects within the wetland or wetland buffer.

- **What if I want to make changes to my existing house, patio, deck, or landscaping?**

If you propose changes to the improvements on your property, then some of the regulations may impact you. First, wetland buffers are expanding from today's buffer. A buffer is an area that must be kept free from structures, patios, or other uses, and trees and other vegetation in that area should be left undisturbed. Any proposals to change your improvements must comply with those buffers, unless no other alternative exists. Second, the regulations limit the total amount of "impervious surfaces" on a site. Impervious surfaces are those surfaces that interfere with rainfall soaking into the ground, and include things like patios, driveways, structures, and certain decks. If your property is already at the limit for

impervious surfaces and your proposal involves adding more impervious surface, then either some existing impervious surface must be removed, or some other material, which allows water to soak into the ground, must be used. Alternatives like pervious pavement, pavers and similar materials that allow some rainwater to get into the ground will be permitted. Third, certain uses of your property will have to be designed considering the impacts on the wetland, including directing light and noise away from the wetland, and using planting techniques to keep pets and people out of the wetland.

What are the required buffers from a wetland?

The size of the buffer depends on the category of wetland and the functions it provides. Buffers are measured from the wetland boundary. Below are the buffer ranges for each category. The specific buffer depends on the functions performed by the wetland. See the draft ordinance or city staff for a complete list of wetland buffers. A structure setback also exists to protect the buffer and allow some useable land area between a house and the edge of the wetland buffer. The City has not rated all wetland’s found throughout the city, however a summary of potential types found in Bellevue is provided below.

Wetland Category	Standard Buffer	Structure setback	Example
I	75 to 225 ft	20 ft	Category I wetlands are rare in Bellevue and not likely to be found on privately owned property. These wetlands may be limited to those that contain at least one acre of mature forest. Wetlands, like Mercer Slough, would be subject to a 225’ buffer.
II	75 to 225 ft	20 ft	Many of the wetlands found in City parks may merit a Category II rating because they are relatively undisturbed and are connected to other habitats such as streams and lakes.
III	60 to 110 ft	15 ft	Category III wetlands are likely to be the most common wetland category for wetlands in Bellevue outside of City parks. Even if they or their buffers have been disturbed by human activities, most wetlands have at least some functions that are high enough to warrant a Category III rating.
IV over 2500 square feet	40 ft	None	Category IV wetlands will generally be found in areas with high levels of disturbance.

Can Buffers and structure setbacks be modified?

Yes, in some circumstances the buffers and structure setbacks can be modified. All efforts to accommodate development on the least sensitive portion of the site, outside of the wetland and buffer should be maximized. In some circumstances this may mean a required basic zoning setback like a front- or side yard setback may be reduced to limit the intrusion into the wetland and buffer. Provisions for buffer averaging are also proposed. Finally, the city will allow a property owner to suggest a change in the buffer. This change must be based on a site-specific study demonstrating that the existing condition of the wetland and buffer, and the features of the proposal, will result in the overall proposal being at least as protective to the critical area as the standard buffer would be. This process of allowing site specific flexibility is referred to as the “critical areas report” process.

Resources:

Critical Areas Project Main Page <http://www.cityofbellevue.org> (see Featured Pages menu)