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Police Department closer to city gun range

By Michael Hawthorne

Tribune reporter

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Chicago police today are a step closer to building an outdoor shooting range on the Southeast Side after narrowly winning access to a plot near wetlands and abandoned industrial sites that Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Gov. Pat Quinn vowed last month to preserve for open space, wildlife habitat and recreation.

On a 5-4 vote, the elected board of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District rejected pleas from conservationists and awarded the Police Department a 39-year lease for land along the Calumet River at 2025 E. 134th St. The city will pay \$10 a year for the site and plans to finance the proposed shooting range with seized drug cash.

Opponents said turning the tract into a gun range betrays well-publicized promises by Emanuel and Quinn to revive the long-neglected but environmentally significant area.

While it is surrounded by automobile plants, chemical factories and garbage dumps, it also is across the river from Hegewisch Marsh, the centerpiece of a federal, state and local effort to turn industrial wastelands into ecological tourist attractions.

Representatives from local conservation groups, including Friends of the Parks, the Chicago Audubon Society and the Southeast Environmental Task Force, said the sound of gunfire will alarm visitors and scare away birds that nest in the area or use it as a stop on the migratory flyway.

But after more than an hour of statements from opponents, a majority of district board members supported the Police Department's bid, which Emanuel's office backed after city and state officials took another look at how the shooting range could affect wildlife.

A city study concluded that noise from up to 40 practice shooters would barely be perceptible in the

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ecologically sensitive areas nearby. Any audible noise from the gun range, the report said, would be at a level similar to normal speech 3 feet away.

Police have long coveted the site because it is surrounded on three sides by a landfill and is about a mile from the nearest residential area. They plan to surround the shooting range with earthen berms and share it with other police departments, including the Water Reclamation District's force.

"We need to ensure the Chicago Police Department receives the training they need to serve on the streets," said Terrence O'Brien, chairman of the district's board.

Others who voted to approve the lease included Commissioners Michael Alvarez, Barbara McGowan, Kathleen Therese Meany and Cynthia Santos.

Critics said they support the Police Department's push for an outdoor range within the city limits, but not in an area repeatedly touted by public officials for open space and recreation.

Debra Shore, a commissioner elected with strong support from conservationists, cited the district's long-standing mission to prevent flooding and manage stormwater, a task that is becoming more difficult as the Chicago area increasingly is swamped by brief-but-intense rain storms.

Converting the site back into a wetland, she said, could store up to 11 million gallons of runoff and relieve the pressure on overwhelmed sewers.

Shore was joined in opposition by Commissioners Frank Avila, Patricia Horton and Mariyana Spyropoulos, who said, "We don't serve just when get a phone call from somebody in higher office."

The site is next to a great blue heron rookery and in the past has been used as nesting grounds by endangered black-crowned night herons, according to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

It is visible from bird-watching platforms being built for an education and research center that former Mayor Richard Daley often cited as an example of his commitment to make Chicago "the greenest city in America."

In a memo, city staff said the shooting range wouldn't violate plans for the Millennium Reserve, a federal, state and local project to turn up to 140,000 acres scattered across the Southeast Side into open space. The site is located in a tract designated for landfills, renewable energy production or other municipal uses.

"This police training facility is desperately needed ... and has been shown to provide minimal sound pollution in the area," the Police Department said in a statement. "Because of its design, it poses absolutely no safety threat to the surrounding area."

Nobody thinks the heavily urbanized area will ever revert to the wet and woody land that led wealthy businessmen during the 1800s to build exclusive hunting and fishing clubs around Lake Calumet.

But when Emanuel and Quinn dramatically expanded the open space initiative last month, the mayor pledged that \$17.9 million would be spent to make the area "a recreational frontier for the city and the state and the region."

Quinn said that turning the area into an ecological preserve will "will convert an industrial area into valuable open space that gives area families a place to gather, play and experience the great outdoors."

"We've always envisioned there would be mixed uses in the reserve," said John Rogner, assistant director of the state Natural Resources Department and a prominent Chicago-area conservationist. "We don't see this (gun range) as incompatible with the overall plan."

mhawthorne@tribune.com

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