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If there's something Quebec's Department of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks ought to know about, it's the ecological importance of wetlands. A marsh is not just a nuisance that gets in the way of developers wanting to build along shorelines or near big urban centres.

Wetlands store water, stabilize shorelines, and stop erosion. They act as nature's water filtration system, diluting and retaining nutrients and pollutants. Wetlands also provide many species of plants and animals with habitats and breeding grounds.

At a time when sensitivities to the misuse of nature are at an all-time high, no government should allow wetlands to be drained and built over, unless there is an overwhelming case to be made for development. Yet Montrealers have learned, via *La Presse*, that in the past year and a half, the department has authorized every single request made by developers to build on wetlands. Eighty-one requests were filed to build on metropolitan wetlands in Laval, Montreal and the South Shore, and all 81 were accepted.

It was in January 2007 that Quebec adopted a measure requiring a developer to get an authorization certificate to build in a wetland. The idea behind the measure was to protect the best wetlands, while allowing expedited construction on smaller, less environmentally-valuable marshes.

Everyone was supposed to go home happy. Developers would get the green light more quickly and important wetlands would no longer be built over.

However, with the government saying yes to every request to build that comes its way, precious little conservation of critically important marshland is getting done.

This summer, Quebec issued guidelines to draw up a plan to conserve wetlands. The goal behind this proposed measure, according to the environment department, is to make an inventory of wetlands, determine their role within their surroundings, and define conservation and development goals for them.

We can only hope government authorities get a move on. If what has happened on the Island of Montreal, and in Laval and on the South Shore is any indication, these critically important ecosystems will be in desperately short supply by the time the legal infrastructure is in place to protect them.

There is also another important issue, one that has become only too common with all levels of government: a lack of transparency. In the case of the 81 accepted projects, it was not possible to find out how much wetland was lost to construction projects. Nor was it possible to learn how much in the way of "compensation" developers paid the various municipalities for the right to build on precious wetlands.

Four of the projects were built in areas described as bogs, which are of particular importance in maintaining the province's ecological health and were supposed to be the object of heightened protection.

Of the two goals of the 2007 measure - wetland protection and speed of construction permission - it's the second that has the upper hand so far. *La Presse* reports that there were 15 projects authorized in 2005, 25 in 2006, 53 in 2007 and 29 in the first six months of this year.

In May, Quebec grandly announced it would protect more than 18,000 square kilometres of forest and wetlands in 23 new conservation areas. Is this what government in Quebec has come to? Announcing new measures, all the while following the old rules of the game? This isn't good enough.