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www.ogeecheeriverkeeper.org
Working Together to Protect the Ogeechee, Canoochee and Coastal Rivers

February 26, 2025

Via E-Mail

Commander, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District
ATTN: Mr. Terry Kobs
1104 North Westover Boulevard, Unit 109,
Albany, Georgia 31707
terry.c.kobs@usace.army.mil

Re: Waller H.B. / Ottawa Farms Industrial Park - Permit No.: SAS-2006-00212

Dear Mr. Kobs,

Ogeechee Riverkeeper 501(c)(3) (ORK) works to protect, preserve, and improve the water quality of the Ogeechee River basin, which includes the Canoochee River, tributary streams, and all of the streams flowing out to Ossabaw Sound and St. Catherine's Sound. The Ogeechee River system drains more than 5,500 square miles across 21 counties in Georgia. ORK works with local communities to retain the ecological and cultural integrity of rivers, streams, wetlands, and related habitats throughout the Basin. One of ORK's primary roles is as watchdog on land development projects throughout the watershed that could pose a significant threat to its water quality and aquatic environments.

ORK offers these comments on application from Mr. Zach Marsh (Resource & Land Consultants) on behalf of Mr. Steven McCraney (McCraney Property Company) under Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 for the expansion at the Ottawa Farms Industrial Site, located east of Jimmy Deloach Parkway and north of Pine Barren Road in Bloomingdale, Chatham County, Georgia (Latitude 32.1116, Longitude -81.3065). Our comments concern (1) the purpose and need for this development, (2) the need to seriously consider a "No Action" alternative or any alternative at all, and (3) the need to preserve wetlands, mitigate wetlands impact on-site, and require solar-ready construction if the permit is accepted. Ultimately, ORK urges the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to assess the purpose and need of the proposed action, consider additional alternatives, seriously consider the wetlands impact compared to previous and proposed fills, and, ultimately to deny this requested expansion as proposed.

1. No demonstrated 'need' for the development's proposed 'purpose'

The Savannah regional market does not have a demonstrable need for this proposed warehousing and logistics development. Warehouse development continues at an unprecedented rate, leading to an ever-growing oversupply of

space. Looking specifically at the Savannah-area warehousing market, vacancy rates have continued to rise over the previous year. As of 2024 Q4, the last quarter with full data, **the vacancy rate is 9.29%.**¹ This is an increase compared to both 2024 Q2's rate of 8.02%,² as well as 2023 Q4's rate of 7.23%³ - **a year-to-year increase of 2.06%.** The vacancy rate remains extremely elevated from the recent low seen in 2022 Q4's vacancy rate of less than 1%.⁴ **Over the last two years**, between 2022 Q4 and 2024 Q4, the Savannah market has **added more than 50 million square feet**⁵ of warehouse space - **a nearly 50% increase** in an incredibly short period. With another 9.87 million square feet currently under construction and likely millions more square feet rezoned but not yet under construction, this trend appears to have no end in sight. **Simply put, there is no clear need for more warehouse and logistics space. The applicants' stated purpose is not a legitimate basis for this project and its associated wetlands fill.**

With this increasing rate of warehouse vacancy, the stated project purpose of "expand[ing] the existing Ottawa Farms Industrial Park to meet current market and client demands of Interstate 16 West 2 Ottawa Farms Industrial Park Chatham County, Georgia Submarket within the Savannah Regional Market" **is not a clearly demonstrated "need."** Based on the 9.29% vacancy rate of the Savannah Region's existing 153,531,831 square feet,⁶ **there is currently more than 14 million (14,263,107) square feet of already-existing and unoccupied warehouse and distribution space** - an increase of 3.5 million (3,532,260) square feet of additional and available warehouse space from Q1 2024's 10,730,847 sq ft of available space. Another 9.87 million square feet was under construction as of 2024 Q4, with millions more square feet rezoned and permitted but not yet under construction. An example of rezoned, permitted, and unbuilt warehouse space is the Seaport 16 Trade Center development, whose construction is on hold based on a slow down in the tenant market.⁷

This expansion of 1,522,360 square feet of additional space at the Ottawa Farms Industrial Site only further adds to the existing and growing trend of warehouse space oversupply and contributes to the current over-build and its related environmental damage. On its own, this 1,522,360 sq ft of additional, speculative warehouse space would increase the Savannah Region's vacancy rate to 10.18% if it is not immediately leased.

Finally, the piecemeal permitting approach and the disproportionate wetlands impact of this latest stage should also be noted. This latest permit expansion highlights a piecemeal approach that potentially skirts full review of the entirety of the construction on site. ORK asks that the entire impact, not just this relatively small impact, is considered by USACE's decision-makers.

¹ Colliers International. Q4 2024 | Savannah Industrial Market Report. See:

<https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2024q4industrial>

² Q2 2024 - see <https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2024q2industrial>

³ Q4 2023 - see <https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2023q4industrial>

⁴ Q4 2022 - see <https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2022q4industrial>

⁵ Q4 2022 total = 102,993,004 square feet (Q1 2023 total = 103,514,071 [minus] Q1 2023 delivered = 521,067) -

<https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2023q1industrial>

Q4 2024 total = 153,531,831 square feet (Q3 2024 total = 137,731,831 [plus] Q4 2024 delivered = "15.8 million") -

<https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2023q1industrial> and

<https://www.colliers.com/en/research/savannah/2024q4industrial>

Two-year net increase = 50,538,827 square feet

⁶ See Note 1.

⁷ Savannah Morning News. "Industrial Park in Bryan County empty nearly two years after groundbreaking." May 30, 2024. See:

<https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2024/05/30/seaport-16-trade-center-in-north-bryan-has-not-gone-vertical-yet/73773238007/>

The Waller H.B. / Ottawa Farms Industrial Site's stated purpose does not respond to any legitimate or existing need for additional warehouse space. As such, **the need for this development does not outweigh the negative impact to the waters of the U.S. and the environmental and public uses it supports.** The U.S. Army Corps should deny this permit application on these grounds.

2. Alternatives must be considered - specifically a 'No Action' alternative

Alternative actions must be considered in reviewing this permit modification application. Prior to any permitting decision to fill wetlands, it must conclusively determine that there are no practicable alternatives that are less damaging that would achieve the same purpose of the proposed action. **Based on the overwhelming supply of vacant and under construction warehouse space, a 'no action' is the least damaging practicable alternative.**

The Joint Public Notice fails to note any consideration of any alternative to the proposed expansion action. Federal regulations direct the USACE to "[e]xamine practicable alternative[s]" to the proposed action, including both a no action alternative as well as other alternative locations.⁸ The action cannot be permitted if "there is a practicable alternative...which would have less adverse impact."⁹ Based on the information included in the Joint Public Notice, this alternatives analysis appears to have not been undertaken by the USACE. If one has been conducted, that information is not shared here and not available for the public to constructively comment on. As such, ORK calls on the USACE to delay any permitting decision until fully considering alternatives to the proposed action and gives the public an opportunity to comment on that alternatives analysis.

A 'no action' alternative should be the least damaging practicable alternative to the proposed action. The applicant's stated purpose of "expand[ing] the existing Ottawa Farms Industrial Park to meet current market and client demands of "Interstate 16 West 2 Ottawa Farms Industrial Park Chatham County, Georgia Submarket" within the Savannah Regional Market" can immediately be achieved by multiple existing projects that would fulfill this proposed action's addition of available space multiple times over. As noted above, more than 14 million square feet of warehouse and distribution space is currently built, unoccupied, and available to meet the purpose of this proposed project. Because the purpose and goals of this project are already being achieved, any additional warehouse space at the cost of 3.51 acres of jurisdictional wetlands, and more acres of nonjurisdictional wetlands¹⁰ cannot be the least damaging practicable alternative. As such, ORK asks the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to consider and ultimately select the 'no action' alternative and to deny this permit modification as requested.

Likewise, the environmental damage that would result from this project clearly outweighs the unnecessary addition of warehouse space that this project proposes. Between January 2020 and November 2023, more than 800 acres of wetlands have been filled in Bryan, Chatham, and Effingham counties due to warehouse developments.¹¹ This

⁸ 40 CFR § 230.5(c) - as directed by 33 CFR § 323.6(a).

⁹ 40 CFR § 230.10(a).

¹⁰ See Attachment A below.

¹¹ Savannah Morning News. "Warehouse boom threatens coastal Georgia communities, environmental groups say." November 6, 2023. See:

<https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/environment/2023/11/06/environmental-maps-show-how-warehouse-development-impacts-coastal-georgia/71471422007/>

number is almost certainly larger now, more than a year later. In that context, the 3.51 acres of jurisdictional wetlands that will be destroyed by this project alone outweighs the nonexistent benefit from this project. But when also considering the many acres of nonjurisdictional wetlands that will also be destroyed, the harm to the environment is even worse. Wetlands provide important environmental functions, including but not limited to pollution filtration, fish and wildlife habitat, groundwater recharge, and flood control. Losing these important natural resources threatens the water quality of the Little Ogeechee River, the habitats and health of the fish and wildlife that rely directly and indirectly on these wetlands, and could lead to increased pollution-laden flooding. These major, long-term impacts to the environment outweigh any benefit that would come from adding additional warehouse space to an already-saturated market. As such, the 'no action' alternative is the least environmentally damaging alternative while still meeting the stated purpose and the goal of meeting warehousing and distribution needs. ORK strongly urges the Army Corps to select the 'no action' alternative and to deny this project.

3. The public interest review factor do not weigh in favor of approving this project's permit

The relatively minor benefits reasonably expected from this proposed expansion are outweighed by the reasonable foreseeable detriments when considering the public review factors. The cumulative effects, both of this expansion as well as the original project, are not overcome by the additional warehouse market saturation this project represents. As such, ORK urges the USACE to deny this permit as not in the public interest.

In terms of economics, this project does not benefit the public. Economic factors are specifically listed as a review factor. As noted above, these warehouses threaten to add further vacancy to the market, and present the possibility of never being occupied. This appears to have little economic value. Without realistic projections, estimates, or any cohesive plan, speculative warehouse builds must actively prove that there is *any* economic value in new warehouse construction. Further, in "consideration of property ownership" of neighboring and nearby properties, the presence of a larger warehouse complex and the constant industrial activities on the property limit the value of nearby properties. Considering these economic factors, this project is not in the public interest.

When considering the continued degradation and destruction of the region's environment, the detriments to the public interest are made clearer. The 800+ acres of wetland destruction in just the last five years makes these aquatic resources a rapidly disappearing resource. The habitat function, pollution filtration, groundwater recharge, and stormwater control role, as well as other environmental functions that wetlands play, continue to disappear. This continued devaluation of wetlands when compared to the apparently unnecessary need for more warehouse space will continue unabated if the USACE does not take an active role in wetlands management. A wetlands protection plan is necessary, unlike hundreds of million square feet of new warehouse space. The environmental detriment of both the expansion and the original project is not in the public interest.

The continued loss of wetlands, ultimately, reduces the safety of the area and the wider region. As noted in the above paragraph, wetlands provide important, natural, and free stormwater and flood control functions. These aquatic resources slow down and absorb stormwaters. Paving over these resources not only removes this control and absorption, the impervious surfaces speed up stormwater and exacerbate flooding if left unmitigated. Further, the

Note 11 - See also: Attachment B, showing "Warehouse Expansion Map - Chatham County" for a visual representation.

industrial site leaves pollutants behind that pollute waterways and neighboring properties with potentially toxic materials. Stormwater management features are less effective, as they are normally constructed to minimum requirements based on outdated storm and flooding data. The site's apparent location in the 0.2% flood hazard area, nearby to both 1% flood risk areas and the Little Ogeechee River, threaten to contribute to flooding. This increased flood risk, in a flood prone area, threatens the area's safety and property values - clearly a detriment to the public interest.

In sum, the detrimental economic, environmental, and safety effects to the public interest outweigh any benefits of this project. As such, ORK urges the USACE to deny this permit.

4. Should the permit be approved - on-site wetlands mitigation and a 'solar-ready' build should be permit conditions

If the U.S. Army Corps, despite the lack of need and the clear environmental damage, still chooses to permit these wetlands to be filled, ORK urges that on-site wetlands mitigation be prioritized over the use of mitigation credits.

On-site mitigation provides the best option for reducing the direct environmental impacts resulting from a project. The gold standard with any mitigation efforts is to preserve as many acres of wetlands as possible, avoiding their filling in the first place. Short of preserving all wetland, which the project, as proposed, fails to do, on-site mitigation and restoration is the next-best option. Rather than relying on mitigation credits to preserve resources in a geographically-distant location, the pollution reduction services and habitat loss resulting from wetlands fill can be directly reduced by on-site restoration projects. Likewise, mitigation focused on restoration, rehabilitation, and creation of wetlands goes a step further to add new resources to the environment rather than simply preserving already-existing resources and balancing those against the lost wetlands. On-site restoration projects can more successfully approach net-neutral wetlands impact, or even a net-positive, where the use of mitigation credits guarantees a net-loss of wetlands. ORK urges the Army Corps to prioritize wetlands preservation and on-site mitigation and restoration over relying on mitigation credits for this, and all, projects.

Further, requiring solar-ready construction ensures that solar energy can be quickly deployed in the future. Unused warehouse roofs provide often open and unobstructed access to sunlight. Solar projects help to reduce costs on site and add a resilient energy source when regional electricity systems may go down. Requiring solar-ready construction avoids the future cost of retrofitting warehouses, which may be prohibitive once built. By making the initial structure built solar-ready, future costs are reduced. Finally, making these warehouse roofs available for solar projects also helps to preserve forests and agricultural lands, which would otherwise be targeted for solar projects.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration; please let me know if you have any questions:
ben@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org.

Ben Kirsch, Legal Director
Ogeechee Riverkeeper

Attachment A

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's
National Wetlands Inventory
for the
Ottawa Farms Industrial Site development



Attachment B

Warehouse Expansion Map - Chatham County

Available at:

<https://savrk.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/nearby/index.html?appid=fe9842acff4046a49628da7c6eca4d51>

Warehouse Expansion Map - Chatham County

