

# Built to be



**e**hris Wilkes, senior vice president for South Bend-based Holladay Properties, oversees development at the 1,500-acre AmeriPlex Business Park just southwest of Indianapolis International Airport. While driving through the grounds one day he noticed a dead tree sticking out of a newly constructed retention pond.

"It was just laying in the water," he recalled. "I saw it and said to one of our people, 'What is the deal with that?'"

Had this been pretty much any other office park in the city, "the deal" would have been resolved by procuring a chain and a truck, and using them to haul the old trunk away. But not here—not in the state's first Certified Wildlife-Friendly Development.

Wilkes was informed by the grounds crew that the tree was *supposed* to be there, to shelter fish and serve as a basking spot for turtles. So it stayed.

"It's a different approach," Wilkes said of the environment-friendly rules that govern AmeriPlex, which is home to both a massive PepsiCo Distribution Center, Purdue Research Park, and to quite a few birds, butterflies and deer. "Some people would say, 'I'm going to drag that tree out of there because I don't like the look of it.' But, in this case, there's a function for that tree."

*AmeriPlex's unique attributes make it the state's only certified wildlife-friendly biz park*

By **Sam Stall** • Special to IBJ

At first it would seem that the demands of a sprawling office park and environmental sensitivity go together about as well as crude oil and water. But AmeriPlex has managed to strike a precarious balance, making it the first—and so far only—facility of its kind in Indiana, and perhaps the nation, to pull it off.

This strange meeting blending of business incubator and wildlife habitat began several years ago, when the Indiana Wildlife Federation decided to expand—greatly expand—a program developed by its parent group, the National Wildlife Federation, to certify residential backyards as "wildlife friendly." To do so, private citizens must demonstrate that they provide animals with food, water, cover, and a

place to raise their young. In the typical backyard this could consist of a bird feeder, bird bath and some shrubs and trees.

The IWF decided to take the concept to the next level by establishing wildlife-friendly certification programs for schools, neighborhoods, even industrial and commercial developments. Which is where AmeriPlex comes in. Thanks to a serendipitous series of personal relationships—along with peculiar foibles in the way the park was developed—it was certified by the IWF in October of 2007.

It seems that Holladay Properties' senior vice president, Doug Hunt, is an ex-state senator who enjoys a longstanding relationship with IWF boss John Goss, a former director of the Indiana

Department of Natural Resources, and Gary Doxtater, director of development for the IWF and a former director of the Indiana Fish and Wildlife Division.

"[Hunt] played an important role in supporting this stuff, and it made a really nice marriage," said Doxtater.

Interestingly, gaining the Wildlife-Friendly Development certification for a business requires roughly the same things one has to do to get a backyard certified—providing woodland creatures with food, water, cover, and a place to raise young. There are also the requisite meetings and reviews, plus an IWF re-certification process every three years. AmeriPlex was uniquely placed to ace the program, thanks to development decisions made during its inception in the mid-'90s—long before anyone contemplated the idea of a "green" office park.

According to Wilkes, tenants in most parks are responsible for providing their own drainage. This usually means building a tiny retention pond somewhere on the property, into which the runoff from building roofs and parking lots is routed. At AmeriPlex, however, drainage was already provided via a series of larger ponds located in undeveloped portions of the grounds. "You might take 100 or so acres and route it all into a six-acre pond," Wilkes said. "Not surprisingly, it becomes a little sanctuary for wildlife, because the pond is somewhat segregated from parking lots and buildings."

Thus, when IWF workers surveyed the property, they found that AmeriPlex was already more than halfway to its goal. Other changes, including sewing the landscape with prairie grasses, helped put it over the top—and saved some money to boot.

"When you plant prairie grasses, they become wonderful homes to all kinds of wildlife," Wilkes says. "And you don't have to mow them. We're expending less on labor and fuel and wear and tear on lawnmowers."

Of course, becoming wildlife-friendly can also accrue some significant expenses. AmeriPlex's decision to establish site-wide drainage is a fairly expensive proposition that few business parks emulate. The company considers it a perk, reasoning that while it drives up the per-acre price of land, it also decreases the amount of territory a tenant needs to purchase because they don't have to dig their own pond. However other developers might balk at the price of such an approach—especially if the main reason was to provide a home for birds and fish.

Which might explain why companies aren't exactly lining up to earn the title of Certified Wildlife-Friendly Development from the IWF.



Becoming Indiana's first wildlife-friendly business park was a long, involved process for Holladay Properties.

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"We've had two different residential developments come to us," Doxtater said. "They came in with their pretty plans and they wanted us to certify them based on the drawings, even though they hadn't even gotten permits to do anything yet. We told them that after they got their roads and water in—which took two years at AmeriPlex—we'd require that all re-vegetation be done, plus erosion control and several other things. We didn't hear from those people again."

Yet it's possible, just possible, that the concept might catch on. Though Doxtater says it's hard to produce any sort of cost-benefit analysis proving that green principles enhance the bottom line, one point is obvious. Residential and commercial developers have always known that a parcel in the middle of a sun-parched former cornfield is less valuable than a piece of wooded or waterfront property. So why not protect such valuable assets?

That sort of mindset certainly affected Wilkes, who started out as a tenant at AmeriPlex before being hired to run the place. In his previous capacity as CFO for Panther Racing, he helped shop around for the team's current address inside the complex.

"We knew image was very important in our sport, and we entertained sponsors and prospective sponsors, and we were looking for exactly what AmeriPlex offered, which was a park-like environment," he recalled. "This was back in '01, so talk about being green wasn't prevalent. We just knew it looked nice."

The IWF is trying to raise awareness of its program by sponsoring a series of workshops—the first of which took place last April at AmeriPlex—to familiarize businesses with the certification procedures. That first event attracted some 44 participants, including landscape architects, biologists and consultants of various stripes.

Perhaps, as interested parties climb higher on the learning curve, participation will increase.

"I think sometimes if you just look at the upfront costs, some folks may shy away because of the investment you have to make," Wilkes says. "That's always going to be a challenge for some. But I think ultimately that most people will come around."

"Meanwhile," he continued, "I'd be a liar if I told you I wasn't glad to be the only one that seems to be getting it."\*

## AmeriPlex Business Park—Indianapolis

**Location:** 5715 Decatur Blvd., south of Indianapolis International Airport

**Green claim to fame:** Certified as the state's first Wildlife-Friendly Development by the Indiana Wildlife Federation

**Size:** 1,500 acres

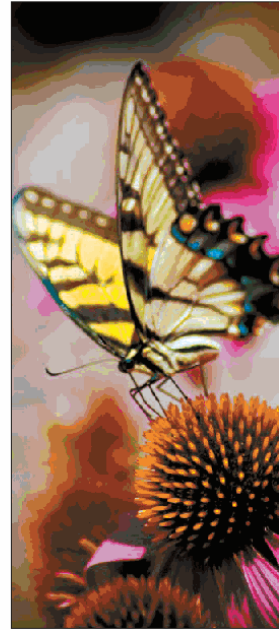
**Developer:** Holladay Properties

**Major tenants:** Purdue Research Park, Pepsi, Allstate Insurance

**What makes it wildlife-friendly?** Landscape was designed to attract wildlife by providing areas for food, water, shelter, and a nurturing environment for young animals. Park uses reduced mowing practices, removes invasive species and replants native plants.

**Wildlife-friendly features:** Five acres of wetlands, including nine ponds, plus acres of prairie, woodland and habitats for native species.

Source: AmeriPlex, Indiana Wildlife Federation



Warehouses and distribution centers go hand and hand with nature at AmeriPlex.

Photo courtesy: Shanna Shaub Photography



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