

# Michigan River News



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## Dowagiac River dam's fate uncertain as nearby Paw Paw again flows free

By Andy McGlashen • October 15, 2011



Paw Paw River flows over the site of the former spillway dam in Watervliet.  
: Environmental Consulting & Technology

*Editor's note: This is the second in an occasional series on major dam removals planned or underway in Michigan.*

The Paw Paw River is again flowing freely through the City of Watervliet in southwest Michigan nearly a century after it was dammed.

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**Just 20-some miles away in Niles, a dam nearly as old on the Dowagiac River is still standing, despite a checkered safety record and calls from the state and environmentalists for its removal.**

The dams have some things in common. Both are on tributaries to the St. Joseph River. Neither has been used for power generation in years. And, importantly, neither creates the kind of large impoundment that can sink dam removal efforts by raising thorny legal questions and the ire of lakeside property owners.

There are also critical differences that help explain why one dam is history and the other remains. But local experts say it comes down to commitment – Berrien County decided years ago to remove the dam it owned on the Paw Paw, while the City of Niles has yet to decide whether to restore or remove its dam.

Watervliet's dam was actually two structures on the same site: a spillway dam that once powered a paper mill and a diversion dam that directed the river's flow to the spillway.

Crews removed the diversion dam on Monday after **taking out the spillway** in late September.

The circumstances in Watervliet made the decision to remove the dam relatively straightforward.

Unlike the Pucker Street dam in Niles, the structures in Watervliet were just a couple of feet high and easily cleared by salmon and steelhead, so anglers weren't concerned about the migrating fish disturbing the upstream fishery—a **common source of contention** when dams are targeted for removal.

More importantly, the dam on the Paw Paw was dangerous, according to Marcy Colclough, senior planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, which helped coordinate the removal.

“One time when I was there we had a pretty big rain event, and there was water just seeping around the sides of the dam,” she said. “It was pretty scary.”

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On top of all that, removing the Watervliet dam went a long way to restore what The Nature Conservancy considers one of the highest-quality watersheds in the entire Great Lakes basin.

The Paw Paw's floodplain is remarkably undeveloped and forested, which acts as a natural water filter, said John Legge, conservation project director for the conservancy. The watershed also provides excellent wildlife habitat, he added.

"Any time you have a river system that is able to flow the way it developed naturally, that's going to have benefits for biodiversity at a lot of levels," Legge said.

For example, the river's diverse freshwater mussels can now further colonize the river. More than 100 miles of stream habitat are now reconnected, some of which may provide spawning ground for lake sturgeon, which live in the St. Joseph River but have lost spawning habitat, Legge said.

All of which, paired with the high cost of restoring the dam, made a strong case for removal and prevented any organized opposition, Colclough said.

Once Berrien County decided to remove the dam, project partners lined up nearly \$1 million from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, along with \$100,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and \$56,000 from the state Department of Natural Resources.

The Pucker Street dam also poses safety questions. A partial collapse led authorities to evacuate nearby homes in 2008.

Removing it would also have ecological benefits like improving water quality and opening upstream areas to fish passage, said Jay Wesley, Lake Michigan basin coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources.

A group called the Dowagiac River Keepers also advocates for taking down the Pucker Street dam to restore the natural ecosystem and improve recreation opportunities.

Some anglers have expressed concern that removing the dam will ruin fishing upstream by allowing migrating fish to compete with resident brown trout for food and habitat. Wesley says worried fishermen should look at northern Michigan rivers like

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the Pere Marquette, where strong salmon and steelhead runs "coexist just fine" with excellent trout fishing.

Probably the biggest reason why the city hasn't made a decision on the dam is its potential to produce electricity, as it did until the 1990s. Three companies have approached the city about buying or leasing the dam for hydroelectric generation.

The city issued a call for proposals from companies to install so-called hydrokinetic turbines, after South Bend, Ind.-based Falling Waters, LLC proposed buying the dam outright and installing the technology.

The company said the turbines would increase the dam's potential electric output while allowing safe fish passage, and offered to buy the dam from the city for \$100,000.

But Wesley said the technology is unproven and that he doubts the claims about not harming fish. He also said little is known about Falling Waters LLC.

"I haven't seen anything in operation," he said. "It's a concern to me. I hope it's a concern to the City of Niles. They make a lot of claims, but I'm yet to see a demonstration."

Niles Mayor Mike McCauslin said he also has not seen "strong evidence" that the company's claims are true. The technology is "so new, there's probably not a tremendous amount of data," he said.

Falling Waters LLC also approached Berrien County about buying part of the Watervliet dam to produce power, but not until just weeks before the structures were removed.

The company did not return multiple emails and phone calls from Michigan River News.

Wesley said he's provided Niles officials with information on grants available for removing the dam and offered the state's help with the process. Colclough said she also offered to help write grant proposals.

"What's frustrating to me as a biologist is that there hasn't been a commitment," Wesley said, particularly since it usually takes about five years to secure grants and contract with engineers before removal can begin.

But McCauslin says the state is pulling him in conflicting directions – the pro-dam removal stance of the DNR fisheries division and other agencies, and a 2008 state law that requires Michigan utilities to get 10 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2015.

“Somewhere, those policies are going to collide,” he said.

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