



Local News

Paw Paw River lands big grant

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Removal of a dam and spillway in the Paw Paw River in Watervliet near Hays Park will create a more diverse fish population. John Madill / H-P file photo

\$1.1 million will remove dam and spillway, help river return to natural state

By SCOTT AIKEN - H-P Staff Writer

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ST. JOSEPH - Federal and state agencies have agreed to provide nearly all of the \$1.1 million required to remove a pair of deteriorating structures in the Paw Paw River in Watervliet, a step that will allow the stream to return to a more natural state.

The project, in the planning stage for several years, involves removing a diversion dam and a spillway that once provided water power to generate electricity for a paper mill.

With funding in line, a permit is being sought, and work could start in the spring.

The concrete structures have not generated electricity in decades. The diversion dam, upstream

several hundred feet from the spillway, is in compromised condition and could fall apart.

"It's just a matter of time," said Dan Fette, community development director for Berrien County.

If the structures still generated power or had some other economic benefit, he said, efforts would be made to save them.

Although a dam failure would probably not cause downstream flooding, engineers believe that the debris, if it ended up in a certain position, could back up water and inundate the floodplain upstream.

Fette said environmental agencies have a keen interest in taking out the structures so that the Paw Paw River can resume a natural flow.

The removal is expected to result in improved spawning habitat for fish, a more diverse fish population and reduced sedimentation.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have agreed to contribute grant funding.

NOAA will kick in the lion's share, about \$900,000, and Berrien County's portion will be \$25,000.

The dams are owned by the Berrien County Brownfield Authority, which acquired them with the paper company property west of North Main Street and north of downtown Watervliet. The dams are on the east side of Main Street along Hays Park.

Fette said the Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission, which has experience in watershed management, brought the governmental agencies together to move the project forward.

"Everyone has been really excited to work on this project," he said.

The diversion dam is built at a point where the river goes into two channels, with most of the flow to the south channel. An island is situated between the two channels.

The north channel was assumed to be the natural channel before the dam was constructed, Fette said. But engineers believe there was always a backwater south channel.

The water in the north channel is expected to rise only about 6 inches with removal of the dam, Fette said. Because of its poor condition, the structure does not hold back much water.

After removal, engineers estimate that 70 percent of the river's flow will be in the south channel and 30 percent in the north.

Although the price tag for the project might seem high, Fette said it's expensive doing the work in a way that will minimize environmental disruption.

Plans call for cutting the concrete structures into pieces with diamond saws and lifting out the pieces with heavy equipment. That work is expected to progress fairly quickly, Fette said, but positioning the equipment will be a challenge.

Banks will be stabilized as part of the project, and large rocks are to be placed at points on the river bottom to slow erosion.

The diversion dam is to be removed first, Fette said, and the same procedures will then be followed to take out the spillway. Work will then be done to reduce sedimentation on the north river bank in the area where the two channels join on the downstream end of the island.

A final survey and hydrology model for the project have been completed, and a permit application is to be submitted to the DNRE on Dec. 15.

Fette said a public hearing will be held, probably in January. At that time information about the project will be presented and the DNRE will receive comments.

If permits are approved, work could begin in the spring.

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