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Local News

River freed from dams prison

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Contributed photo The Paw Paw River in Watervliet flows unobstructed where a diversion dam was removed last week. Removal of the dam and a spillway downstream are meant to return to the river to a more natural state, control erosion and improve the fishery.

Paw Paw now flowing in what's thought to be original channel

By **SCOTT AIKEN** - H-P Staff Writer

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WATERVLIET - For the first time in a century water is flowing unimpeded in the span thought to be the Paw Paw River's original, natural channel after a contractor completed removing the second of a pair of crumbling concrete dams.

The diversion dam came out in a few hours Monday. Bank restoration then began on both sides of the channel.

The other structure, a spillway downstream from the diversion dam, was removed in an afternoon two weeks ago, said Dan Fette, community development director for Berrien County.

Fette said the dam removal project is well ahead of schedule.

In the planning stage for a decade, the grant-funded project aims to restore the river to a more natural

state. Benefits will include less erosion and better fish habitat.

One of the now-removed dam structures was the only obstacle to spawning fish between Lake Michigan and the Maple Lake dam in Paw Paw.

Marty Boot, environmental scientist for Ann Arbor-based Environmental Consulting & Technology, which is working on the project, reported that salmon were swimming up the artificial riffle put in place after the diversion dam was removed. A riffle in its natural state is a rocky or shallow part of a stream or river where the water flows brokenly, according to Oxford Dictionaries online.

The Paw Paw River has more than 40 fish species, making it one of the highest-quality freshwater systems in the Great Lakes Basin, according to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' Fisheries Division.

Fette said the concrete in the structures was so deteriorated that they crumbled when excavation work began.

That made it possible to remove the structures in far less time than originally estimated.

The dams, which were not designed to be flood-control devices, are in a section of the river east of M-140 and Riverside Drive, near Hayes Park.

The diversion dam and spillway were constructed before 1918 to redirect water to Watervliet Paper Co. on the west side of M-140. The company has long been out of business, and the Berrien County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority acquired the property.

With the concrete dams gone, Fette said, the water flow is stabilizing in what is thought to be the river's the river's natural course. Flow is also stabilizing in the mill race. The natural channel, which has about 30 percent of the total flow, runs along the north side of an island, and the mill race, with 70 percent of the flow, runs along the south side.

The diversion dam was located near the eastern end of the island, and the spillway was near the western end. Before the dams were removed, water in the natural channel tended to be brackish because of the low flow.

To enable the contractor to get equipment in place to remove the dams, an access road was built through wetland.

Environmental agencies, which have provided most of the financial support for the project, were brought together by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, funded by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, last year agreed to provide \$922,759 to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for the dam removal project.

Other funding agencies are the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, \$56,198; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, \$100,000; and Berrien County, \$25,000.

A contract for the work was awarded in July to Bayshore Contractors, Grand Rapids, which submitted a low bid of \$622,867.

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