

NEWS

Wilmington dam called a 'drowning machine' — but a fix eludes victims' families



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After her brother drowned at a dam in rural Wilmington in 2000, Kathryn Pietraszek thought officials would do something to end the series of deaths there.

Her brother, Andrew Antolak, had been paddling down the Kankakee River in a rented canoe with his girlfriend, Teresa Masnica. Unfamiliar with the area, they got pulled over the waterfall and caught in a powerful undertow at the base of the dam from which they could not escape.

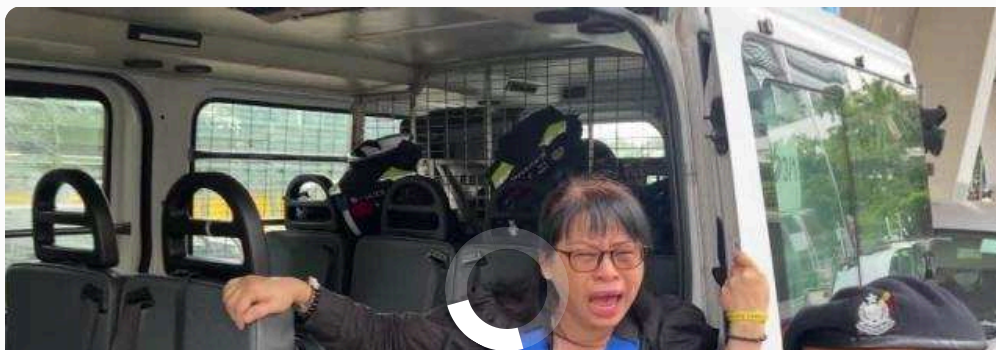


The Chicago couple — he was 33, she 22 — were among at least 18 people who have died at the dam since 1984, city officials said. The man-made structure about 60 miles southwest of Chicago has become a graveyard for curious children, fishermen who got too close, elderly people who fell in and good Samaritans who gave their lives trying to save others from drowning.



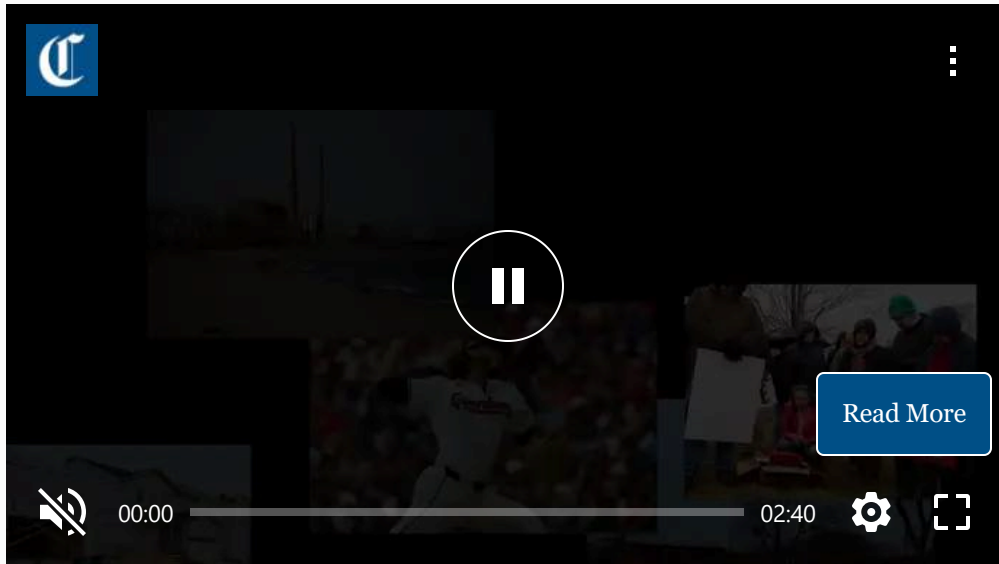
A family photo of Andrew Antolak and his girlfriend, Teresa Masnica, who both drowned at the Wilmington dam in 2000 while paddling the Kankakee River in a canoe.

The Antolak and Masnica families sued the city and others, and local officials put up warning signs. Yet years later, no structural changes have been made to the dam to try to reduce the danger. This past spring, it claimed two more children, continuing its legacy as what critics have called a “drowning machine.”



"This should never happen anymore," Pietraszek said. "It seems like they don't care. If it happened to their family, maybe they would do something and remove it."

The latest victims, 12-year-old Eder Arroyo and his 13-year-old sister, Abigail, from Joliet, drowned on Memorial Day — the same holiday as Antolak and Masnica — after the boy tried to touch the waterfall and his sister tried to save him.



In addition to the deaths, at least 23 other people have had to be rescued at the dam, according to the city's count.

Such low-head dams, so-called because they're low enough to let water flow over them and difficult to see from upstream, are considered a nationwide menace by many river regulators and enthusiasts. Even strong swimmers and people wearing safety vests can drown in one. The only escape is counterintuitive: to drop to the bottom and use one's legs to move along the riverbed far enough away to escape the churn before trying to resurface.

Last year, 25 people drowned and at least 10 were seriously injured at dams across the country; 26 more have drowned this year, according to the Association of State Dam Safety Officials.

The effort to remove the dams is part of a broader movement that has eliminated hundreds of them nationwide that were considered obsolete, according to American Rivers, a conservation group that advocates for dam removal. Small dams in Illinois were typically built to provide power for mills, river crossings or irrigation, but critics say they have outlived their original purpose and now cause silt buildup, stagnant water and algae blooms.

"Communities are consistently surprised at how fast the rivers and fish come back after a dam is removed," American Rivers spokeswoman Amy Kober said. "It's a healing process."

But dam removal has also prompted a backlash in some cases by local residents, particularly when they remove hydro-electric power or reservoirs, which are more common in western states with much larger dams.

In Illinois, prompted by safety concerns, Gov. Pat Quinn's administration embarked in 2012 on a project to remove low-head dams. The state identified 25 hazardous low-head dams — including Wilmington's — and spent \$10 million to remove at least nine of them, including several on the Des Plaines River.

But when Democratic lawmakers and Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner got mired in their yearlong budget stalemate, the state ran out of money to continue the project.

And in Wilmington, proposals to remove the dam have met resistance. As recently as 2013, there was talk of transferring ownership of the dam from the city to the state, but since the state proposed removing the structure, local leaders are trying to save what they consider a defining feature of their small town. Its main park sits on an island in the Kankakee next to the dam. Wilmington is known as "The Island City," and a river runs through its logo.

Because of the dam, people come from around the Chicago area to fish and picnic at the park. But when a chunk of the dam broke in 1990, the river gushed out and left the riverbed bone-dry. So locals want to improve safety, City Administrator Tony Graff said, but dread the thought of losing their defining feature, despite assurances from state officials that the river would continue flowing, just as it does now downstream from the dam.

"Our island is the jewel of Wilmington," Graff said. "A lot of people from the

This past spring, the city hired an engineering firm to study the hydrology of the site to see if cutting notches in the top of the dam would reduce or eliminate the force of its undertow.

"We're all in agreement, we need to do something," Graff said. "We're trying to maintain the character of the river without removing the whole dam."

A related aspect of the dam site is the mill race, a narrow channel that divides the island from the city. One proposal would turn the mill race into a kayak and canoe run.

If implemented, that plan would resemble changes made to a dam in Yorkville, where Graff used to be city administrator and police chief and oversaw plans to tame a similarly notorious dam.

In Yorkville, the mayor had asked state authorities to review the Glen D. Palmer Dam's structure because of drownings there. Regulators put in rubble to fill in a hole and reduce the undertow at the downstream base of the dam, but the problem returned.

Eventually, after the dam had claimed several more lives, regulators built concrete steps onto the dam's downstream base and added turbulent chutes through which canoes and fish can go around the dam. That solution preserved the deep water upstream that's used by fish, fowl and outdoor enthusiasts.

Graff said he started planning for that fix in 2001, and the project wasn't completed until 2010, showing how long it can take to get such projects done. It also cost more than \$4 million.

Simply removing a dam, by contrast, can be accomplished in a few weeks and would cost less, said Daniel Injerd, director of water resources for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

"This has to be one of the most dangerous dams in the state," Injerd said. "It's an almost ideal site for looking at dam removal."

Despite fears about the impact on fishing, state biologists believe that removing dams improves the fish stock by returning rivers to their natural state and letting fish migrate freely.

Some online commenters on the subject have said people should use common sense and stay away from the dam. But attorney Michael Rom, who helped represent the Antolak family in its suit against the city, said he couldn't believe the problem hadn't been fixed, adding that fencing could help prevent people from falling into the water there.

"How they allow that to happen every couple of years is insane to me," he said.

The results of the engineering study of the dam is expected to be presented to the City Council in the coming weeks. If the proposal to modify the structure with notches to reduce undertow gets the go-ahead, the city will then have to undertake an environmental assessment that could take from six months to two years.

Then it would need to draw up specifications and seek bids before construction could begin.

Officials hope to work with the state and the Army Corps of Engineers, as well as with a couple of homeowners west of the river whose ownership claims extend halfway into the river. Federal regulators are leaving it to local officials to decide what to do. The Army Corps may regulate modifications through permits, but officials said they have no position on the debate.

Cutting notches into the dam could cost around \$1 million. The state estimated that safety modifications, such as adding steps or rocks to the backside of the dam, could cost \$2 million to \$5 million. The city doesn't have the money, so officials hope to get state or federal funding.

Meanwhile, the river remains a draw for anglers, boaters and bathers. Mike Casagrande, a fisherman who has spent years canoeing in the area, said the slow-moving water near the dam lulls people into a false sense of security.

"It's very deceiving," he said.

This summer, the U.S. Department of the Interior named the Kankakee River a National Water Trail, which recognizes its recreational and ecological value, but does nothing to change the dam.

Among the long list of drownings around the Wilmington dam, one

One survivor who was pulled out with a rope said the water was swirling in circles and sucking him down like a vacuum cleaner.

The Wilmington police chief at the time, Wally Evans, told the Tribune, "I'm telling you, it's terrible here, it's really terrible."

The boy's family sued and reached a confidential settlement with the city's insurer.

After repeated horror stories like that, Antolak's family members would prefer the dam be removed. They would like to see a memorial to all those who have died there, which would also serve as a warning of how deadly the dam can be.

Mary Janikowski, another of Antolak's sisters, said, "We wanted this to stop when Andrew died."

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