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Debate renewed over removal of Danville dams

By Tracy Crane

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DANVILLE — The city's recent request for federal dollars to study the environmental effects of removing one low head dam on the Vermilion River and altering another at Ellsworth Park has renewed debate over the man-made structures.

Some local fishermen don't support the city administration's efforts to remove or alter the two dams, because they believe it will hurt fishing along the river and make the waterways too shallow for fishing boats.

Local fishermen recently attended a city council meeting and publicly stated their concerns, explaining how the Vermilion River provides a great place for fishing. They said the dam creates a wider, deeper pool of water upstream that allows local fishermen to get their boats on the waterway and fish.



But the city, which owns both dams, wants to remove or alter them mostly for public safety purposes. A drowning occurred in 2003 at the dam on the Vermilion River just east of the Memorial Bridge on South Gilbert Street. And at least one death has also occurred at the low-head dam on the North Fork River in Ellsworth Park.

The two dams are not far from each other. The North Fork runs into the Vermilion River at the south end of Ellsworth Park, which is just west of Memorial Bridge.

It was a canoeing accident in July 2003 that led to the most recent fatality at the Vermilion River dam. University of Illinois graduate Sandi Barnett, 24, a native of Woodridge, and three other girls from Champaign-Urbana rented two canoes from Kickapoo Landing in Kickapoo State Park near Oakwood for a 7-mile trip down the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. The group missed the stopping point and eventually came to the low-head dam where their canoes

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capsized just before going over the structure. One of the canoeists made it to the bank, and emergency personnel rescued the other two clinging to items floating in the churning water. But Barnett went over the dam and drowned.

That was the third death at the dam in a 12-year span, according to Mayor Scott Eisenhauer who, in response, helped organize a committee to determine what to do about the structure. The committee eventually recommended removal as the best option, but the city has not had funds available to do the work.

In 2006, then-Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn launched the "Illinois Dam Safety Initiative" to educate the public about dam safety and make changes to improve safety. Between May 2006 and March 2007, 10 people died at Illinois dams, including three sets of triple drownings involving five good Samaritan-rescuers, according to the state's department of natural resources web site.

The state initiative has targeted low-head dams as a danger to the public. Low-head dams have a recirculating current at the base of them that can continually pull people, debris, even boats, under the water's surface. The state initiative also proposed funding for changes that would make dams safer, including removing dams, and made Department of Natural Resources officials available to evaluate dams.

The state agency has been involved with both dams in Danville.

But at a council meeting last month, Eisenhauer said it was at the city's request that the state has been evaluating both dams, not the state mandating that the city remove them. Eisenhauer said three deaths in 12 years is a significant number, and the city has sought funding to remove the dams since 2004 with no success until now.

Loren Wobig of the Department of Natural Resources said the state has made funding available for this project and others across the state through bonds. The federal grant that the city council allowed city administrators to apply for would allow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to do monitoring along the river and determine possible environmental effects of dam removal.

Natural Resources officials said that the Ellsworth dam would not be entirely removed, but that is the plan for the dam on the Vermilion River. Wobig said the Vermilion River dam is not structurally sound anyway, and natural forces are slowly taking it out. City Engineer David Schnelle said those structural problems are another reason removal is the best option. Rather

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than removal, the Ellsworth dam would be lowered about one foot and a 150-foot rock ramp would stretch downstream from the dam, making a more natural, gradual slope rather than an abrupt drop.

Both dams are run-of-the-river dams that are not designed for flood control, and Wobig said the proposed changes at both dams would not lessen any flooding upstream and would not increase any flooding downstream. The Vermilion River dam was originally built by a local power company, and city officials say the Ellsworth dam likely was built many years ago to create a swimming hole in the park.

Wobig said both projects would involve stream and bank stabilization. In response to concerns about what would happen downstream of the dams, Wobig said the dam on the Vermilion River wouldn't be removed to let the river do whatever it wants downstream. He said it would also be a river stabilization project to avoid any significant erosion or other issues that could occur by removing the dam or altering the one at Ellsworth. He said that's why the U.S. Geological Survey has been involved for more than a year doing sediment analysis and modeling to determine where that would go. He said Natural Resources wants to know what will happen when that dam is removed, and that analysis is still ongoing.

The city council's approval of the request for federal funds does not commit the city to removal. Wobig said the city council would still have to grant permission to remove the dam on the Vermilion River and lower the other one. Trent Thomas with Natural Resources said there's more monitoring and research to be done as well as lengthy permitting processes involved, so the earliest removal and other changes could occur would be early next year.

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