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IDNR to recommend removal of 2 dams

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A sign warns of the dams upstream and downstream from the boat ramp at Ellsworth Park on the North Fork River and Vermilion River.

Matt Huber
Commercial-News

Removal of the Vermilion River dam has been talked about for decades, especially since it was the site of three deaths in about the last 20 years.

The most recent was the drowning of a 24-year-old canoeist in July 2003. The canoeist and three companions went over the dam and got caught in the dangerous undertow. The other three female canoeists were rescued.

Another death occurred at that dam in 1998. Michael Steinwand was in a boat by himself, according to Vermilion County Coroner Peggy Johnson.

There also have been four drownings at the Ellsworth Park dam since 1970.

In 1987, 16-year-old Troy Leach drowned while attempting to rescue a friend who had fallen into the river just below the dam.

There also was a teenage death in 1935, three years after the dam was completed; and a 13-year-old and another 16-year-old died in 1971 in separate incidents.

Now within the next month or so, Illinois Department of Natural Resources officials will present a final strategic planning study recommending the removals of both the Vermilion River and Ellsworth Park low-head dams.

IDNR Director Marc Miller said a report will be provided to the city explaining the reviews have been completed and explaining the recommendations of a complete removal of the Ellsworth Park dam and complete notching of the Vermilion River dam. The buttresses would be left there for the Vermilion River dam behind the Public Safety Building, with the dam face being removed.

“Part is keyed into the bank, so you do not disrupt the bank …,” Miller said, adding that all the concrete that holds back the flow would be removed.

Other options looked at for the dams included partial removal, stepped spillway and rock ramp alternatives.

Run-of-river dams are those that span the entire width of a river channel and water continuously flows over the crest of the dam. The drop at the dam crest, and the often dangerous currents downstream, contribute to hazardous conditions for river users and pedestrians.

Miller said there is money in the state's capital funding for the removal of the dams in Danville this year.

He said removing the dams improves water quality when rivers act like lakes for nutrient transport, removing sediment, etc.

"There will be a free-flowing river through this section that will allow the migration of fish downstream," Miller said. "It will be healthy for all species."

Miller said removing the dams will allow fish to move up about 175 miles of stream.

"There will be more fish floating upstream instead of stopping at the dam," he said.

"It should actually improve conditions and spawning," he said.

The pools of water created by the dams won't be there anymore and it will be a change for boaters and those who fish, Miller acknowledges. But in terms of the river health and water quality, the Vermilion and North Fork rivers will remain healthy river systems with a high-quality habitat, he said.

Miller said someone will be able to launch a canoe anywhere upstream. Canoeists would be able to canoe down the Vermilion River from the Middle Fork, which is already popular with canoeists, all the way to the Wabash.

The area will be able to promote more recreational activities, he added.

Past city action, discussions

City officials have wanted the dams removed because they serve no function and drowning deaths have occurred there. The dams also pose a danger to emergency responders. Removing the public safety hazards would reduce the city's maintenance costs.

In March 2012, the city council requested $60,000 through the National Fish and Wildlife Service in Fish Passage Program funding to assist with the costs associated with monitoring the response of the river environment to the removals of the Vermilion River and Ellsworth Park dams.

Sediment transport, fish species, bugs and other items were to be monitored.

IDNR and city officials didn't know whether this was part of the funding associated with the Danville dam removal project.

Prior to that, in April 2007, council members authorized the pursuit of state and federal funding for the Vermilion River/Ellsworth Park dam removal project. The dams date back to 1914.

The IDNR has determined the dams dangerous and, through the state, has earmarked $3 million for their removal.

According to the IDNR, the water level would change with the dam removal with upstream much more shallow and going from a lake-like environment to a river environment downstream.

A one-time study by the IDNR showed 37 fish species downstream and 23 upstream.

Fisheries should see improvements. They won't be as concentrated, but there should be an overall improvement in the river system, according to the IDNR.

City engineer David Schnelle said the Ellsworth Park boat pad will be operational whether the dam is removed or not.

The city requested funding because if the IDNR obtained the funding directly, the funds would be receipted into the state general fund making them difficult to obtain for dam removal projects, according to the city resolution. There is no cost to the city.

In August 2007, a study on Illinois dams estimated it would cost $2.05 million to remove the Vermilion River dam behind the PSB.

The drowning of a canoeist in July 2003 prompted a Vermilion River Dam Committee, consisting of city and environmental officials, to start meeting in 2004 to look at removing or modifying the dam.

The river dam committee recommended removing the dam, but funding was the holdup.

The Vermilion River dam's concrete continues to deteriorate, and it no longer has a productive use, Public Works Director Doug Ahrens has said.

The city installed more signs and buoys to mark the hazards.

Doing nothing with the dams is the least expensive option but doesn't address public safety and drowning issues, officials said.

Removing the dams increases boater safety and protects Danville and Vermilion County emergency personnel from hazardous rescues at the dam, officials also have said.

Removing the dams also won't affect flooding, river flow or cause the river to dry up, officials have said.

Removal will, however, affect river depth and fishing. It will improve smallmouth bass fishing, and flathead catfish, walleye and muskie will remain, officials projected.

Other dam removals

Miller said other sites, such as the Hofmann Dam in Riverside on the Des Plaines, have already seen improved public safety where people have died in the past at the dams.

“It removes that risk …,” Miller said about allowing free passage for paddlers.

Miller said other dams have been removed or are being removed, such as on the Fox River, and they’re improving fish passage and recreational benefits too.

Wisconsin has a successful dam removal program, he added.

All have life spans and capital replacement costs, Miller said. Removal costs are lower than to rebuild a dam that no longer serves a purpose, he said.

“It’s connecting the community back to the river …” Miller said.

City employees have continued to monitor the condition of the dams and any impacts to cautionary signs.

Gov. Pat Quinn, who was then lieutenant governor, launched the Illinois Dam Safety Initiative in June 2006 to educate the public about dam safety and propose changes to make waterways safer.

Since then, legislation was passed regarding standards of signs, buoys and other ways to communicate risks to the public about dams, according to the IDNR.

Quinn in Oct. 2012 announced the removal or modification of 16 low-head dams throughout the state during the next few years.

With the city owning the Ellsworth Park and Vermilion River dams, the city council will have to approve removal of the dams.

“It is their dam and we’re here to assist the city,” Miller said.

FYI

According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, a submerged hydraulic roller occurs due to the hydraulic conditions on the Vermilion River behind the Public Safety Building and Ellsworth Park dams because no riverbed protection was placed below the dam during construction. Over time, the turbulent forces generated by a hydraulic roller, have eroded a hole in the original river bed at the base of the dam. The tailwater submerges the hydraulic jump, creating the submerged hydraulic roller. These rollers typically pull in and hold objects, including people, which often leads to emergency rescues or drownings. There have been several deaths at the dams since 1935.

Removal construction could start this year with city council approval.

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