

Death spurs movement to remove Danville dam

76-year-old dies after canoe capsizes twice near structure



JOHN R. CRANE/REGISTER & BEE

The White Mill dam behind the Danville Family YMCA is where a canoe carrying an Axton man and his adult grandson capsized Sunday. The older man died following the incident. Now Danville City Council is revisiting the idea of removing the structure after abandoning the idea a few years ago.

BY JOHN R. CRANE

jcrane@registerandbee.com
(434) 791-7987

Following Sunday's canoeing incident at the White Mill dam that led to an Axton man's drowning, it looks like Danville City Council will revisit the idea of demolishing the structure.

Vice Mayor Gary Miller wants the dam removed and Mayor Alonzo Jones has said he would like for council discuss the idea.

"I want to have this conversation again," Jones said Thursday. "Once again, we lost another life at one of the dams."

Jones was referring to the drowning of 5-year-old Kolton Karnes at the Brantley Steam Plant dam in 2010. He was the

fourth person to drown at one of the Dan River's low-head dams since 1965. The dam, which was located downstream of the White Mill dam, was removed in 2011.

On Sunday, 76-year-old Axton resident Ronald Edward Reynolds died after the canoe he was in with his grandson capsized twice at the bottom of the White Mill dam.

But Steve Adkins, who led a petition drive that opposed removing the dam when council considered the idea about four years ago, said his view has not changed.

"The dam is not a hazard to those who use the river responsibly," Adkins, who lives in Ringgold, said Thursday. "When water levels are safe, people are able to walk along the dam and even climb on it

to sit or stand to fish. When water levels are high, there is a risk of problems by being in the water."

Sunday's incident occurred when Reynolds and his adult grandson went over the dam in a canoe, got tangled up in debris and the current and overturned, Department of Wildlife spokeswoman Paige Pearson told the Danville Register & Bee on Tuesday.

They were able to get the canoe right-side up and reenter it, only to capsize again and fall out. The grandson was able to hold on to a rock but Reynolds was not.

Neither Reynolds nor his grandson was wearing a life jacket.

The elevated water level following

SEE **DAM** | A5

Dam

From Page A1

rainfall could have played a role in the incident, Pearson said. It was at 8.75 feet, more than 2 feet above the normal 6.5 feet.

Instead of getting rid of the dam, the city could place a rip rap below it, Adkins said. Rip rap is loose stone that forms a foundation for a breakwater or other structure below the dam to destroy any dangerous hydraulic effect.

"It creates 'a set of stairs' for the water to flow across versus dropping water over the dam where in certain conditions a hydraulic can form," Adkins said.

Danville Public Works in 2016 recommended removing the dam and still supports the idea, said city engineer Brian Dunevant.

"I am not aware of any change in that recommendation," Dunevant said, adding that he does not know of a functional purpose for the dam now.

The city did not demolish the dam previously because many area residents opposed the idea.

The concrete White Mill dam, owned by the city, stretches 1,144 feet across the Dan River and is 5 feet tall.

The dam is believed to have been built around 1894 to create water power for the Dan River



JOHN R. CRANE/REGISTER & BEE

A sign warns of the danger of the White Mill dam in Danville.

Inc. factories along both sides of the Dan River. For most of its history, it was not accessible to the public.

A review by consultants hired by the city nearly four years ago found at the time that fully removing the structure — also called the Long Mill dam — would bring the most benefits and the fewest concerns.

The firm DHM Designs Inc. in Raleigh, North Carolina, also

found that demolishing the dam would restore natural habitat and an extended view up and downstream of the structure, showing water rushing over rocks in the river.

The study estimated at the time that it would cost between \$100,000 and \$250,000 to remove the dam.

Also, getting rid of the dam would result in no ongoing maintenance costs or dam safety con-

cerns, the study concluded.

By removing a large obstruction, smaller obstacles could be added to get more recreational benefits from the river, a consultant with DHM told councilmen at the time. The only drawback would be elimination of the visual cues of the dam's presence.

Adkins' petition, however, pointed out the dam's focal point in the area between the Main Street bridge and the covered

bridge that crosses the Dan River.

"The dam creates a beautiful waterfall, the sounds of cascading water, and the reflective 'pond effect' behind it," according to the petition. "If a canal or other access were provided, the pond area above the dam will be very attractive to canoeists and kayakers. Once removed, however, the area behind the dam [if historical references are true] will likely be good for waders, and catching debris."

But Miller was not surprised at Sunday's fatal incident, even though there are signs warning of the dam's dangers.

"We knew it was going to happen," Miller said. "The signs are not working. You get caught in those hydraulics, it's just horrible. They get trapped in there."

Danville Parks & Recreation Director Bill Sgrinia said he had no opinion on whether the dam should be removed.

Mark Bishopric, owner of Three Rivers Outfitters in Eden, North Carolina, had no solid view on the matter, either.

"Paddling in that area is very seldom for me and my customers," said Bishopric, who offers canoe and kayak trips on the Dan, Smith and Mayo rivers.

When on the Dan, he and his customers usually enter the river downstream of the dam, Bishopric said.