

Fish passage plan sparks questions

Written by Steve Ostermann

Wednesday, 17 November 2010 18:52

With 60% of engineering done on Bridge St. dam project, trustees, residents continue to voice concerns about its impact

Design plans for a fish passage that will be built above the Bridge Street dam in Grafton are 60% completed and will be submitted to the Village Board for approval next month, officials were told Monday.

During a presentation to the board, engineers said work on the federally funded project is proceeding on schedule and should be done by early next year — in time for construction to begin by late May.

Plans call for a 650-foot fish passage — which is designed to allow native species such as northern pike, walleye, bass, trout and salmon to travel upstream and spawn — to be built along the east bank of the river. The box-culvert structure will extend from the dam to an exit by a boat launch planned north of Washington Street (Highway 60).

Chad Davison, one of several Bonestroo engineers working on the project, told an audience of 30 residents that the entrance to the passage will be placed in the face of the dam. Two sections of the sloped passage, totaling 230 feet, will be enclosed.

Among other features, Davison said, the passage will have two “stop logs” to control water flow and control invasive species, as well as an opening in the enclosed areas to allow light in the channel. Auxiliary spillways will be constructed to handle high water during flooding conditions, he said.

Although a preliminary design reviewed by the board in spring called for the entrance to the passage to curve sharply around the dam face, the new plan replaces the bend with a more straight approach, said project coordinator Dale Buser, a Bonestroo engineer overseeing the project.

The change will include rebuilding the east abutment and repairing portions to meet state flood-control standards, he added.

“This project is very unique to meet all the criteria we had to,” Buser said.

The project will require dewatering the dam. Construction crews will access the shoreline at a point just south of Washington Street.

In June, the board directed Ozaukee County, which is overseeing Milwaukee River restoration work, to proceed with plans for an east-shore passage rather than a west-shore option. Engineers said the latter option would be more costly and require the demolition and reconstruction of a downtown riverwalk and public overlook.

The project is part of river restoration work funded through a \$4.7 million federal stimulus grant

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awarded to the county by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The total amount of restoration funding has since grown to \$7.2 million with the addition of \$2 million in U.S. EPA grants and \$536,350 in supplemental NOAA funding.

Andrew Struck, county director of planning and parks, said the NOAA funding includes a budget of \$1.6 million for the Bridge Street dam fish passage. With construction cost estimated at \$1.3 million, the project is expected to remain within budget, he said.

Village officials were poised early last year to raze the landmark dam as part of a NOAA-funded restoration effort. However, a petition drive by the Save the Dam Association forced the village to hold a binding referendum, in which voters decided the structure should be preserved until at least 2019.

The village subsequently approved the concept of an east-bank fish passage.

Despite assurances from Struck and engineers, two board members and several residents voiced skepticism about the project during Monday's meeting.

"Can you guarantee that there will be fish coming up?" Trustee Ron LaPean asked. "I'm not hearing that you can, and you can't guarantee there won't be an invasive species, either."

LaPean said he has grown tired of rising costs in federally funded projects.

"Anytime you get government involved to get something done, it's going to cost more and more money," he said. "This fish ladder is going to be one big white elephant."

Village resident Mary Mulloy questioned why the origin design for the passage was changed.

"If this goes to pot, what have we got?" she asked. "It doesn't seem like all the homework has been done."

Trustee Jim Grant, an outspoken opponent of federal stimulus projects, said the fish passage isn't needed.

"I like everything you've got here, but we can't afford it," Grant told the engineers. "No matter who's paying for it, it's not a necessity."

Struck said the design plans will be sent this week to the Department of Natural Resources and Army Corps of Engineers for review.

The Village Board is scheduled to consider the plans at its Monday, Dec. 6, meeting. Struck said the county and engineers will submit a completed design early next year.

Plans call for the project bids to be secured in February or March, with a contract awarded by April. Construction is scheduled to start by late May and take four to six months to complete, Struck said.

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