

Village balks at backing fish passage

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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After approving Bridge St. dam project in December, trustees reject resolution urging DNR to grant permit

Ozaukee County's request for the Department of Natural Resources to issue a permit for construction of a fish passage at the Bridge Street dam failed to receive an endorsement from the Village of Grafton this week.

By a 3-2 vote Tuesday, the Village Board rejected a proposed resolution asking the DNR to approve the \$1.6 million project, which is scheduled to be built as part of federally funded Milwaukee River restoration work being done by Ozaukee County.

Village President Jim Brunnquell urged the board to support the resolution, saying cancellation of the fish-passage project would also mean the village will have to pay more to upgrade the downtown dam to meet state standards for flood control. Repairs to the dam's east abutment have been included in the project plans.

"This is taxpayers' money. The DNR is not going to let the dam sit the way it is," Brunnquell said before the vote.

"With that being said, our board is responsible to our voters and our village residents. We had a solution, but the DNR has rejected that and says we still have to pay."

However, a motion to approve the resolution — which was modeled after one unanimously approved by the county's Natural Resources Committee last week — received the backing of only Brunnquell and Trustee Richard Rieck. Trustees Susan Meinecke, David Liss and Lisa Uribe Harbeck voted against the resolution.

Uribe Harbeck said the DNR's preliminary decision last month to deny the fish-passage project was based on a legitimate concern about the possible spread of aquatic invasive species and a deadly fish virus, both which the agency contends will be exacerbated if the fishway is built.

"You have a chance of these invasive species getting beyond the barrier," Uribe Harbeck said. "That is concerning to me. I don't think it is a good enough risk to take."

Tuesday's vote comes after the village approved plans for the fish passage last December by a 5-1 vote.

Plans call for a 633-foot-long, box-culvert fishway to be built along the east shore of the Milwaukee River above the dam. The passage is designed to allow fish such as salmon, trout, northern pike and walleye to swim upstream and spawn north of Grafton.

The fish passage would have a 244-foot enclosed channel and 389 feet of open channel, ending north of Washington Street (Highway 60). To allow dewatering for maintenance and

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control of invasive species, stop-log gates would be installed at each end of the passage.

County Planning and Parks Director Andrew Struck said \$300,000 has been spent on design work for the fishway, which would be funded through a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant. Construction is estimated to cost \$1.3 million.

The project has been approved by the county, village, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and supported by dozens of local, regional and state environmental groups. However, after reviewing project plans this spring, DNR officials said they plan to deny the permit request based on reconsideration of the risk of invasive species — including round goby, Asian carp and sea lamprey — and viruses.

“Generally we are in favor of fish-passage projects. However at Grafton, we believe the potential danger outweighs the benefits of the project,” Randy Schumacher, a DNR regional fisheries supervisor, said during a public informational meeting on the project held last week at the county’s request.

Most of the officials and residents who spoke during the meeting criticized the DNR, saying the agency has done an about-face by working with the county on a fish-passage design and then deciding to deny a permit needed for its completion.

Several officials said the DNR is being overly cautious, noting that the round goby, the agency’s primary source of concern as an invasive species, hasn’t been detected any closer than 22 miles south of the Bridge Street dam.

However, Liss said he was concerned about the possibility of the fishway being built and later having to be closed.

“Then will we have a big empty tube there?” Liss asked.

Village engineer David Murphy said that if invasive species are detected in Grafton, the fishway could be closed but modified to have a trap-and-sort design that would allow fish to be removed. DNR officials have indicated they would support that type of passage.

Several residents said they opposed construction of the fishway.

Sue Hass, 1266 Water Ter., said she thought the fishway is well-designed but questioned if it would be effective, would damage the dam and would cost the village more money in the future to maintain and operate.

“I think the DNR has presented a logical, rational appraisal in its presentation,” said Hass, who urged the board to reject the resolution.

Ted Warwick, 1742 Falls Rd., said the fish passage shouldn’t be built “because we don’t have the money to spend on this.”

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“I think it’s an egregious use of public funds, and we shouldn’t do it,” Warwick said.

DNR officials said a final decision on the permit request will be made after they consider input from the informational meeting and additional comments that are being accepted until July 7.

Two trustees — Jim Grant and Dave Antoine — did not attend Tuesday’s meeting. Grant has been an outspoken critic of the fish-passage plans, citing his opposition to the use of federal stimulus money.

Pending the DNR’s final decision on the fish passage, the village is poised to explore ways to upgrade the Bridge Street dam’s west abutment to meet state flood-control standards. A joint meeting of the Village Board and Public Works Board will be held Monday, July 18, to review design options prepared by Bonestroo engineers.