

Agency reverses its decision on Bridge Street dam, allowing village to save money on repair project

Reversing a contentious decision, the Department of Natural Resources has agreed not to require the Village of Grafton to install a floodgate as part of repair work on the Bridge Street dam.

The DNR last week informed village officials that the gate — which the agency said early this year was needed for the dam to comply with state flood-control regulations — could be replaced by other, less costly options.

“We believe there are a number of options that could achieve our joint goals of preserving aesthetics, minimizing costs, providing public safety and facilitating maintenance activities,” Eric Nitschke, the DNR’s southeastern regional director, stated in an e-mail to Village President Jim Brunnquell.

The agency’s change of heart — which is expected to save the village at least \$300,000 in construction costs — was welcomed by village officials, who had protested the gate requirement and asked the DNR last month to reconsider its decision.

“The DNR made a conscious effort to work with the village,” Brunnquell said at Monday’s Village Board meeting.

“There was a new spirit of cooperation. I’m very pleased with the way this worked out.”

Early this year, the village was poised to begin repairing both dam abutments, including reconfiguring an overlook area on the west side of the structure and raising the riverwalk to reduce flooding. Replacing a masonry wall adjacent to the east abutment was also part of the plans.

The project, which was expected to cost \$410,000, was expected to bring the dam into compliance with NR333, the state law regulating dams and flood control, by 2019. The DNR awarded the village a grant that will defray half of the cost.

However, after reviewing the village’s preliminary plans for the work, the DNR decided the project should also include a floodgate to ensure the impoundment can be drawn down in case of emergencies and for dam inspection and maintenance.

The DNR defended its decision at a Village Board meeting in February but agreed to reconsider the gate requirement after meeting with village officials last month. During that meeting, the village argued that the dam is structurally sound, can be inspected without drawing down the impoundment and could be upgraded to meet flood-control regulations without adding a gate, flashboards or stop logs.

DNR back downs on floodgate ruling

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According to cost estimates, the gate could have cost \$300,000 to \$700,000. Other options ranged from \$50,000 for flashboards to \$100,00 for stop logs. The village would have also had to pay for maintaining the gate.

Village Engineer Dave Murphy said that another control option the DNR has agreed to is establishing an emergency action plan calling for heavy equipment to be used to breach the dam and lower water levels if the structure fails.

The emergency plan will be included in design documents prepared by Ayres & Associates, an Eau Claire engineering firm the village hired for the upgrade project.

“The consultant (Ayres) indicated that it is feasible,” Murphy said.

In his e-mail, Nitschke confirmed that “one option rather than constructing gates is a ‘wet breach’” to lower the water levels. He also suggested the village consider constructing shallow stop logs or gates at a lower cost than full-depth gates.

“There are pros and cons to each approach, and it would be beneficial for us to discuss the options together,” Nitschke wrote.

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said the action plan that includes the wet-breach option will be part of a revised project design the Village Board will consider at its Tuesday, April 17, meeting.

“The wet breach is a low-cost, low-technology option with no annual operating and maintenance-related expenses,” Hofland said. “It is expected that there will be some additional engineering costs.”

Hofland said he and other village officials will continue to work with the DNR to discuss design options.

Pending final approval of the plan, construction work on the abutments and riverwalk is expected to begin in 2013, Murphy said.

Hofland said village officials were hopeful the DNR would reverse its decision on the floodgate requirement after they met with Nitschke and Matt Maroney, the agency’s deputy secretary.

“The village has a fairly compelling situation,” Hofland said. “Ultimately, the DNR worked with the village on ways for us to meet their requirements and meet our concerns.”

The DNR’s latest decision also drew praise from board member Jim Grant, an outspoken critic of state regulations he said would increase the village’s cost share and liability in upgrading and

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maintaining the dam.

“We’ve gotten much better cooperation than in the past. We’re on an equal level now,” Grant said.