Written by Steve Ostermann
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Bridge St. dam project to be presented for public review before village makes decision on design in June

Plans for a fish passage that will be constructed this year at the Bridge Street dam in downtown Grafton will be unveiled at a public informational meeting Wednesday, May 19.

During the 7 p.m. event, engineers will present design details for the passage, which is part of the Milwaukee River restoration work being overseen by Ozaukee County, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

The presentation is scheduled for a joint meeting of the Village Board and Public Works Board. No action will be taken that night, but the Village Board will place the project on its June 7 meeting agenda for further discussion and possible approval, Hofland said.

The fish passage, which is designed to allow native species to travel upstream over the dam, is scheduled to be built late this summer as part of restoration work funded through a $4.7 million federal stimulus grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The passage, which is expected to cost $1.5 to $1.7 million, remains in the design stage, according to Andrew Struck, the county's parks and planning director.

"The final cost and design will be dictated by its location," said Struck, who noted that engineers were continuing this week to study options, including whether the passage will be built along the dam's east or west abutment.

Village officials and residents will have the chance to provide input for the proposed design

during the informational meeting, Struck said.

Plans call for the village to approve a final design for the fish passage in the next four weeks, Hofland said. Pending approval by state and federal agencies, work on the passage could begin by late summer or early fall, but Struck said no completion deadline has been set.

“We’re hoping to have the project done by the end of the year. That’s the only timetable,” Struck said.

Construction of the fish passage — which is designed to allow species such as northern pike, walleye, bass, trout and salmon swim upstream — was facilitated by the outcome of a binding referendum April 6 in which voters overwhelmingly decided to preserve the Bridge Street dam until at least 2019.

The future of the dam came into question last summer when the village’s Public Works Board recommended razing the century-old landmark. The recommendation came after board members were told by the Department of Natural Resources that the village might have to spend as much as $2 million to repair the dam to meet state flood-control standards by 2020.

Before the Village Board could act on the recommendation, a citizens group — the Save the Dam Association — petitioned to have the dam’s future decided by referendum.

The cost of removing the dam would have been funded by the NOAA grant. Instead, the referendum vote ensured the village’s participation in river restoration work would include construction of the fish passage.

Plans call for the passage to be a low-sloping channel that would give fish a separate waterway along the shoreline, Struck said. The channel is expected to be 600 to 700 feet long, vary in width from 8 to 20 feet and accommodate a water depth of 18 inches, he added.

Starting at the face of the dam, the passage would continue upstream and open into the river north of the Washington Street (Highway 60) bridge, Struck said.

“The whole goal is to provide a passage way for fish that can’t jump or swim up high gradients,” he said. “It’s part of restoration efforts to reintroduce them to the other parts of the river.”

The passage will contain gates for maintenance work and be designed for the possible addition of trap-and-sort controls that could remove invasive species, Struck said.

Although portions of the passage will be enclosed, there will also be open areas where fish can be viewed, he said.

In addition to a go-ahead from the village, the fish passage project will require approval from a variety of state and federal agencies and bidding out the construction work. Those steps are expected to delay construction until late summer or early fall.

A recently completed inspection of the dam revealed it is structurally sound except for the abutments, which are in need of repairs, Village Engineer Dave Murphy said.

Struck said repairs will be done to one abutment as part of the fish passage project, with the cost of those upgrades covered by grant. However, the village will be responsible for repairing the other abutment.

The Village Board on Monday agreed to ask the DNR to extend a deadline to submit a report on the maintenance and operation of the dam until after the completion of the fish passage project. The extension, Hofland said, will also give the village time to consider funding options for the abutment work.

In an advisory referendum in April, voters recommended that the village cover any costs to remove, repair or replace the dam through the downtown tax incremental financing district rather than a general village tax increase.

Another river restoration project to be undertaken in Grafton before the fish passage is the removal of the Lime Kiln Park dam. The village decided in December 2008 to raze the structure, citing its deteriorating condition and the costs associated with inspecting and repairing it.

The DNR has issued a permit to raze the dam, but final approval from the Army Corps of Engineers is still required.

Pending that approval, Struck said, the project will be bid in June and demolition started in July. All work, including shoreland restoration, is expected to be completed this fall, he said.

DESIGN PLANS are being finalized for a fish passage that would allow native species to traverse the Bridge Street dam in downtown Grafton as part of a Milwaukee River restoration project. Photo by Sam Arendt