

Funding for City dam project comes through

By Annette Christie

Berrien County Community Development Director Dan Fette has informed City of Watervliet officials that the funding for the complete dam project located near Hays Park on the Paw Paw River has been obtained.

Fette said that the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has agreed to fund the full removal of both dams and, further, will provide funding for the restoration of the Paw Paw River and associated vegetation and fish habitats. The total grant award is \$922,000.

In May, Fette had announced that the work to remove two dams in the Paw Paw River would begin but that all of the funding for the complete project had not been secured yet. At that time, Berrien County had a commitment for \$56,000 from the Department of Natural Resources, \$100,000 from Michigan Wildlife Fisheries and \$25,000 from the Berrien County Brownfield Authority. An additional \$10,000 had been committed from the DNR after the project was to begin. It was estimated that the cost to remove both dams is between \$680,000 and \$1.3 million.

Previously, the spillway structure that is closest to M-140 was to be the first one that was removed, simply because it is the cheaper of the two to remove. Now, the diversion dam to the east side of the river and the spillway will both be removed. The Berrien County Brownfield Authority acquired the two dams in 2001 as a part of the Paper Mill project. A survey done revealed, as suspected, that both the dams were structurally compromised.

Fette said the NOAA is most interested in assuring that the natural fish habitat in the river is restored, something that will be monitored closely throughout the two-year grant period.

The process will now include a public hearing being held by the state of Michigan at City Hall. There the public will be able to review the initial design and the restoration design.

Fette said he expects the public hearing in approximately six to eight weeks.

The permit process has begun and Fette hopes that by Spring 2011 the permits will be obtained and the project could then move forward.

While it is expected that the removal of the dams could alter the fishing temporarily, Marcy Colclough of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission has said that in the long run it is the best thing for the fishery and habitat.

The dam removal project is listed as high priority in several plans, including the Berrien County Hazard Mitigation Plan, Paw Paw River Watershed Management Plan and St. Joseph River Watershed Assessment.

The Nature Conservancy considers the Paw Paw River as one of the highest quality freshwater systems in the Great Lakes Basin.

The Watervliet dam is the only obstruction on the Paw Paw River from Lake Michigan to the village of Paw Paw and restricts the movement of fish and other aquatic species upstream to over 220 miles of river and streams.



DAM TO BE GONE – The “upper” dam on the Paw Paw River built at the turn of the 20th century to divert water to the Watervliet Paper Mill will be removed, restoring the original course of the river through Hays Park. The dam leaks water underneath and around it, allowing a trickle of water to flow in the old riverbed. At flood stage on the river, water flows over the top of the dam.

(Karl Bayer photo)