

DNR looks at Steamboat Rock dam

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The dam in Steamboat rock is some 80 years old and is in the Department of Natural Resources' crosshairs for modification. A meeting was held in Steamboat Rock, just up river from the dam, to discuss its future.

Nate Hoogveen, River Programs Director for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, has seen dams like the one in Steamboat Rock throughout Iowa. He's seen the good and the bad associated low head dams like it.

Some low head dams are used to create recreational opportunities, some for power. Some improve water quality through aeration. Some do all of that, while also creating dangers to human life.

"Over its 80-plus year life, four people have drowned at this dam," Hoogeveen said. "Like all low head dams, at higher flows it forms a recirculating current that traps and drowns victims. One of our missions at the DNR is safety in outdoor recreation, and we happen to own this dam. We don't want another accident."

These dams also affect aquatic life.

"The dam also limits fish passage, and is the upstream-most barrier for flathead catfish," Hoogeveen said. "You just don't see very many flatheads upstream of this dam, and we could restore their range as far upstream as Iowa Falls - 24 miles upriver."

Greg Gelwicks, DNR Fisheries, indicated a recent study found just two catfish from above the dam to Hardin City. That same study found some 200 from below the dam to Pine Lake. The simple reason is that once fish go over the dam, they can't return.

There are solutions. The DNR, along with Des Moines-based engineering firm LT Leon Associates, were in Steamboat Rock Tuesday to discuss the past and present of the dam. More importantly, the future of the dam was also discussed.

"It's about the future of Steamboat Rock Dam, and it's the first step in what we call an 'exploratory phase' to look at other options than the dam as it is, and decide whether or not to proceed with one of them," Hoogeveen said. "If a pool of water is what's desired most, that's something we can recreate with other methods that don't kill people, for one thing, and it's better for the river in that it will allow fish to move up and down."

Mimi Wagner, of lead engineering group LT Leon, said the meeting produced a lot for her firm to mull over while developing plans. She said the discussion, and individual notes from the crowd, will help the firm develop three plans to present the public. A fourth plan is to do nothing at all.

"The purpose of this meeting was for us to hear what is important locally," Wagner said. "We have to talk to people to know what the concerns are. I made a list of all the questions that were asked and then we'll have the sticky notes, a physical piece of paper with comments we will document and sort by categories and be able to quantify them. But than anything, it will give us a range of what people want and what they're thinking."

Wagner said it's important to the DNR that whatever change or modification they make to the dam is a fit to the community as best as possible.

"I describe the dam as aging infrastructure, similar to bridges and roads," Wagner said. "The dam structure was built around 1940. Just as DOT upgrades or modifies bridges and roads to make them safer for people and with less impact to the environment, DNR brings this same mindset to dams."

The DNR began working on the project in June. LT Leon is presently collecting studies about the dam and the river in the area. They have surveyed the channel and dam, are collecting information on its history, and reviewing information about fish and mussels.

"Eventually, LT Leon will develop several alternatives, one of which will be keeping things as they are," Hoogeveen said. "Others could include things like installing a rapids below the dam to submerge it, replacing the dam with one of several kinds of rapids, or simply removing it."

While every person in the audience had a chance to speak if they chose to, they were also given post-it notes on which to write down their thoughts. Those notes were then stuck to various topic boards to be collected and used to develop a plan.

One such board asked people to name the most important thing about the dam and the surrounding area. The anonymous answers ranged from wanting to encourage more use of the area to keeping the pool above the dam at the same depth it is now. Other notes showed concerns about pollution from field runoff and hog confinements, and hopes that whatever is done to the dam increases tourism and safety.

Following the meeting, at which nearly 100 filled the Iowa River Conservation Club, Hoogeveen said it was productive in that it addressed a lot of concerns and maybe quieted some misconceptions.

"I think people are concerned about the pool of water that they've enjoyed, and the history of this dam is something people are very passionate about," Hoogeveen said. "At first a lot of folks seemed to be thinking that the DNR was going to just rip the dam out. I think a lot of that was in their heads already when they came in. I think and hope they walked away with the understanding that we have more arrows in the quiver than that and that we're able to do things that do right by the river and do right by the people."

Hoogeveen said a decision will likely be made this winter. Another meeting is scheduled for later this fall. With it, preliminary costs of the project will also be presented. The DNR, funded by the state, owns the dam.
