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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2007

Dam demolition will leave river smaller, cleaner

By Mark Ferencik
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The 5th Avenue dam on the Olentangy River is coming down.

The question is when.

After months of hand-wringing and prodding from Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman, city utilities officials have decided to remove the dam just south of the Ohio State University campus. That will help clean the water on that section of the river and open a larger stretch for canoeists and kayakers, they said.

Public Utilities Director Tatyana Arsh made the decision, utilities spokesman Rick Tilton said.

"She just weighed everything in front of her. She takes time to think about things. She doesn't make rash decisions," Tilton said.

Tilton said the city continues to look for more money to pay for potential cleanup costs should tests reveal toxins and other environmental hazards after the river narrows and its banks are exposed. Those costs were a sticking point for the city.

There's no timetable for demolition, Tilton said. There's a state deadline of September 2008, although there's some wiggle room, said Mike Gallaway, surface water manager for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency's central district.

Olentangy work will cost city \$640,000

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is willing to pay \$1.18 million of the projected \$1.82 million demolition cost. The city would pay the remaining \$640,000, which is what the city owes in fines for sewer overflows into rivers. The city would have to pay those fines unless it decides to use that money for the demolition.

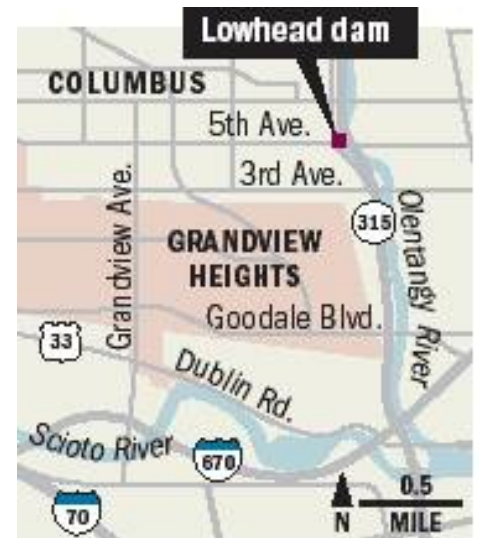
Heather Dean of the Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed said the city's decision means a cleaner river. With the dam removed, the water will flow naturally, and sediments, sewage and other pollutants won't remain trapped behind the dam and foul the water as they do now.

That section of the river is the most polluted, said Jeff Zylland, an environmental planner for the Corps of Engineers. Cleaner water will help fish, mussel and dragonfly populations, he said.

Once the water recedes, it won't look pretty at first, Dean said. There will probably be a lot of junk and trash left on the banks.

"There are going to be mud flats, and you'll probably be pulling out shopping carts," said Bill Mitsch, an Ohio State professor of environment and natural resources. "The river will be trying to sort out where it should flow."

Plans call for crews to seed the banks with grass and plant small vegetation while remov-



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ing invasive plants such as honeysuckle, Zylland said.

But vegetation will sprout over time, perhaps cottonwood or willow trees, Mitsch said.

"I see people's urgency to plant," Mitsch said, "but Mother Nature may do a better job."

"After five or six years, people will say, 'That's pretty.'"

But while it still will be navigable for canoeists, it will be narrower, he said.

"Where's the river?" That's the reaction we'll get," Mitsch said. But the Olentangy, in its free-flowing state, is just a big creek, he said.

The dam was built in 1935 to supply cooling water to an OSU power plant. It was raised to its current height of 8 feet in 1964.

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