

River Advisory Committee Meeting  
Thursday, September 21, 2023  
3 PM  
Town Offices, Nowak Room  
Approved Minutes

1. Call Meeting to Order

Members present: Richard Huber (Chair), Lionel Ingram, Rod Bourdon, Carl Wikstrom, and Conservation Commission Rep Trevor Mattera were present at this meeting. Paul Vlasich, the Interim Public Works Director; Melissa Roy, the Assistant Town Manager; and Kristin Murphy, the Sustainability and Natural Resources Planner, were also present.

Members Absent: Dan Jones, Terrie Harman, PEA Rep Warren Biggins, and Select Board Rep Niko Papkonstantis

The meeting was called to order by Mr. Huber at 3 PM.

1. Approval of Minutes

a. August 17, 2023

**MOTION:** Mr. Ingram moved to approve the minutes of August 17, 2023 as presented. Mr. Bourdon seconded. Mr. Wikstrom abstained. The motion passed 4-0-1.

2. Announcements

- a. Wednesday October 18 Municipal Association Right to Know Training
- b. Wednesday October 11 All-Boards Meeting at the Library

3. Update on River Issues

Interim Public Works Director Paul Vlasich discussed a potential grant for the Pickpocket Dam project. Recently he had a phone call from NOAA [The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] regarding a "Restoring Fish Passage through Barrier Removal" grant. Mr. Vlasich asked our consultant VHB [Vanasse Hangen Brustlin] to review the grant and possibly to fast-forward the study to be able to apply.

Jacob San Antonio of VHB gave a presentation on the Pickpocket Dam study. The alternatives considered were different approaches to dam stabilization, modification, or removal. Stabilization would include substantially armoring the dam from erosion. Modification would mean partial removal or lowering the spillway, but the study is finding that you'd have to lower the spillway so much to deal with a storm event you'd be down to almost no impoundment, and the costs of doing that modification would be well above the cost of other alternatives. Another modification could be raising the abutment. There's one house on Kingston Road that if the dam were to fail during a 100 year flood event, the water would be into their living area; several mobile homes would also be affected. Even if the town acquired those properties, Kingston Road is also overtopped at that event, which would make it still a significant hazard dam. The last alternative is dam removal.

Mr. Huber asked if fish would benefit from dam removal, and Mr. San Antonio said yes, there are alewife, herring, and eel that would benefit.

Mr. San Antonio discussed the levels of current flow, 100 year flood, 2.5X the 100 year flood, and 2.5x times 1.5 taking into account climate change. In all of these storm events, the water overtops the dam.

Mr. San Antonio said Alternative 1 was increasing the existing abutments. We would need to raise them 4 feet, or 6 feet with climate change, which increases the flood risk upstream. This alternative can be thrown out. We would need to raise an abutter's driveway to reach the elevations we need. Alternative 1A would be raising the abutments and also removing a sediment island. In this case, we would have to raise them 3.33 feet or with climate change 5.76 feet. We'd have to raise the abutter's driveway by 3 feet.

Alternative 2 was to keep the abutments as-is, but add a second set of abutments. We'd need to raise the second abutment 3.33 feet or climate change 5.76 feet, but it also results in an increase in flooding. Alternative 2A would be adding a second abutment and also removing a sediment island. In this case, we would have to raise them 3.33 feet or with climate change 5.76 feet. We'd still have to raise the abutter's driveway but by 2.1 feet.

Alternative 3 would be dam removal. This results in a decrease in 100 year flood by 8 feet. For the first mile, there would be about a five foot drop in the water elevation.

Mr. San Antonio reviewed the costs of each option. Alternative 1A would cost \$2,145,000. Alternative 2A would cost \$1,982,000. Alternative 3, full dam removal, would cost \$1,063,000.

Mr. San Antonio said the NOAA fisheries grant, Restoring Fish Passage Through Barrier Removal, is focused on sea-run fish that spend part of time in the ocean and part of the time in rivers and lakes, such as herring. There are additional points if it increases community resilience, which lowering the flood level by 8 feet would qualify for. There is no cost matching by the town. This year the overall funding is up to \$175M. Our cost estimate is about \$1M, so we're eligible to apply. The application is due October 16 and we would hear back about an award in July 2024.

Mr. Ingram asked how much the grant would be for, and Mr. San Antonio said they're looking to fully fund these projects. Mr. Ingram said we'd have to commit to removing the dam, but we've had no discussion with our nextdoor neighbor. Mr. Wikstrom said that Brentwood is more affected by this than Exeter.

Ms. Murphy asked if there is a reduction in flood levels downstream as well as upstream. Mr. San Antonio said the flood benefit is upstream. Under normal conditions, water flows over the dam, so it doesn't attenuate flows downstream.

Mr. Huber asked if the slides from the presentation could be put on the website, and Mr. Vlasich said yes.

Mr. Wikstrom said if we were to improve the dam, would it change the impoundment level? Mr. San Antonio said no, all of these alternatives would keep the impoundment the same.

Mr. San Antonio said that part of the feasibility study is still underway, evaluating impacts of the various alternatives on issues like cultural resources and fish passage. Wetlands would be somewhat affected by dam removal, and some of them would

change to forested area. With the Great Dam removal, we reseeded with native species to prevent invasives and the area recovered quickly. Mr. Mattera said we want to think not just about the quantity of wetlands, but also the quality. These impoundments are usually low-quality wetlands and cut off from habitat. Removing the dam could open up a higher quality of wetland. Mr. Ingram said if wetlands lower and trees start growing, landowners could get more property.

Mr. San Antonio said VHB is still looking at water quality and groundwater levels. Most options won't change water quality, but dam removal would improve it. It won't have much of an impact on water level. It's a narrow impoundment and doesn't hold a lot of water.

Mr. San Antonio said VHB did some sediment sampling. Sediments in the river are relatively clean; there was some arsenic found, but it's thought to be background levels as it is naturally occurring. The sediment can flow downstream without ecological risk.

Mr. San Antonio said regarding infrastructure, one potential concern is Cross Road Landfill. Taking out the dam will change the groundwater patterns in that area, but should stay generally consistent with the patterns currently. We're looking at that more closely.

Mr. Wikstrom asked if removing the dam would affect kayaking or canoeing in the river upstream of the dam. Mr. San Antonio said the river would look more like it does downstream, so kayaking should still be possible.

Mr. Wikstrom asked if this grant comes around every year. Mr. San Antonio said yes, but what we heard from NOAA is that this year it has once-in-a-lifetime levels of funding. It's 4-5X what it normally is.

Mr. Ingram said we don't have the authority to commit to dam removal. Can we move forward on the grant anyway? Mr. Vlasich said they don't want to waste their time on a "maybe." On Great Dam, we didn't rank very highly on the NOAA grants because we didn't have a commitment to it yet. If we did get the grant, the Select Board has the authority to accept the money. Mr. Wikstrom said to get the grant, we have to commit, but we haven't talked to Brentwood yet. Mr. Ingram said we would have to apply saying that it's contingent on public approval next Spring, that's the way our constitution works. He thinks it's worth trying.

Mr. Vlasich said applying would take time away from the feasibility study and would mean some extra cash for the consultant. Mr. Wikstrom asked how much extra. Mr. Vlasich said it's mostly work that they're already doing; the extra cost might be around \$10,000.

Mr. Mattera said it's paramount to determine who has decision making power. Can the Select Board say that this would go through? The money isn't coming from the public. Ms. Roy said her understanding is that the Select Board could make the recommendation to move forward with the grant and then accept that grant. Although it affects Brentwood, it's on our property and we have the right to decide what to do with it.

Mr. Mattera said with the flow of money that's coming from the federal government, there's support in this area for structures to come out. The science is sound. In the Great Bay watershed, we've had the biggest migration of fish since 1992,

and it was because of the Exeter River and the removal of the dam. Mr. Bourdon said after the Great Dam removal, the water was cleaner and moving, and fish came up more.

Mr. Wikstrom asked why Pickpocket Dam was put in originally. Mr. Vlasich said he doesn't know. As far as Exeter owning it, there was a period where the town was looking to do sewer improvements and wanted to use Clemson Pond as a sewer overflow, and part of those negotiations ended with the town owning Pickpocket Dam.

**MOTION:** Mr. Ingram moved to make a recommendation to move forward towards this grant. Mr. Bourdon seconded. The motion passed 5-0.

Mr. Huber said in the Great Dam process, this committee sponsored public hearings but didn't take a position on the options. Mr. Vlasich said through that process, you have a lot of learning. Now you're familiar with the terms and analysis. Mr. Ingram said we didn't have much time on this grant. If we have public meetings, can the Rockingham Planning Commission assist with these meetings, as they did with Great Dam? Mr. Vlasich said we can ask. Mr. Wikstrom said the Select Board could have public meetings if they wanted to. Mr. Mattera said the process for this may not look like the Great Dam removal, because Great Dam was in the center of town. Also, Exeter has been through this before. If there is a public participation process, it won't be as comprehensive. Mr. Ingram said we didn't get a big turnout even for the Great Dam meetings.

4. Other Business

- a. There was no other business discussed at this meeting.

5. Public Comment

- a. There was no public comment at this meeting.

6. Board Calendar

- a. Mr. Huber said the committee can't meet in October because Mr. Vlasich will be on vacation. The next meeting will be November 16th.

7. Adjournment

**MOTION:** Mr. Wikstrom moved to adjourn. Mr. Ingram seconded. All were in favor and the meeting adjourned at 3:40 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Joanna Bartell  
Recording Secretary