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Business petitions against effort to remove Monterey Dam

By Neil Johnson

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JANESVILLE—The air on Saturday was chilly, almost raw, but It's A Keeper bait shop near the Monterey Dam was crawling with customers who were stocking up for the spring walleye bite.

At the shop's front counter, Shawn McCarten was restringing the lines on fishing poles. His wife, Marci McCarten, rings up purchases of colored jig head hooks and live minnows. Other customers stopped to sign a petition on a clipboard.

The petition's subject matter and objective is boiled down in a four-word header: "Save the Monterey Dam."

McCarten and another Janesville resident Jim Chesmore, who brought McCarten the petition earlier this month, are encouraging people who use the Monterey Dam area as a fishing, biking and walking hotspot to sign the petition.

In recent weeks, the city of Janesville has begun to examine its options on the dam. One includes tearing out the city-owned dam. Recent construction bids to repair the dam came back more than double the cost of a consultant's earlier estimate.

The state Department of Natural Resources has ordered the city repair the dam's two spillways, which have been in a state of disrepair for at least two decades.

The dam, which has been in place on the Rock River beneath the Center Avenue bridge since the 1850s, has long been a fixture for local fishermen. The rocky channel below the dam provides food, habitat and spawning areas for fish. Other residents hike or bicycle past the dam on the Ice Age Trail.

The dam is a major meal ticket for McCarten, who has leased the building at 815 S. Washington St. that houses his bait shop for the last two years.

McCarten estimates 30 percent of his customers walk in, buy bait and tackle, and then walk 50 yards south to the area below the Monterey Dam to fish for walleye, white bass, catfish, northern pike and panfish.

If the city removed the dam, McCarten fears it would decrease water levels below the dam, change the dynamics of the aquatic habitat there and ruin the fishing.

That, he says, could put his bait shop under.

"I've been heartbroken since I heard about this idea of getting rid of the dam," McCarten said. "I'm confused about who's pushing what, and I'm just trying to get answers."

McCarten said about 350 people have signed the petition since he put it out in his bait shop about two weeks ago. He said another 150 people have signed it at a few other locations.

McCarten said the petition is advisory, not “a legal thing.” He plans to take the petition sheets to city staff, the city council and Forward Janesville, the city's chamber of commerce, to show how many people use the area near the dam for fishing and recreation.

Clinton resident Ashley Vinke said she has fished below the Monterey Dam for four years. In the spring and summer she and her boyfriend, Janesville resident Dylan Pope, fish at the dam three or four times a week.

Vinke showed pictures on her cellphone of a 20-inch northern pike she caught below the dam recently, and a 37-inch pike that Pope caught there last week.

Vinke signed the “Save The Monterey Dam” petition at the bait shop Saturday.

“It'd be horrible if they took the dam out,” she said. “I wouldn't even know where to fish. Monterey is the best spot in town, easily.”

On Saturday, McCarten said, a group of nine people had come in from Chicago to fish for walleyes at the dam. He said during the winter, people come to the dam area to watch a half-dozen or more bald eagles feed on fish.

It's A Keeper and other businesses have been raising funds to try to build a small pavilion for fishers, bicyclists and walkers who use the Ice Age Trail to sit and relax.

“We're trying to make this a destination,” McCarten said. “If they pull out this dam, it's a disaster not just for us, but for a lot of people who use this area for recreation.”

The city has no immediate plans to tear out the dam, although it's in preliminary stages of reviewing the option with a consultant.

In a 2012 order, the DNR gave the city a deadline by the end of 2015 to repair crumbling parts of the dam's two concrete spillways, and areas below and beneath the spillways where water has scoured out pits in the riverbed.

The city had slated \$250,000 in repair work on the dam this summer, but contractor bids for the repairs came in between \$500,000 and \$800,000.

The city scrubbed the dam repairs last month after experiencing sticker shock. It began reviewing other options.

Department of Public Works Director Paul Woodard said the city is working with the DNR on a city request to take a “wait and monitor” approach on repairs, which he said could be easier for the city to budget.

Inspections show damage to the dam has been present since the early 1990s, but the damage hasn't progressed much since then, Woodard said.

He said the city probably wouldn't bring any discussions of removing the dam to the council until this summer, and he said those discussions would involve “a lot of community and business engagement.”

“Our first choice is to leave the dam in place and continue to monitor it or do spot repairs. That's what we're waiting to learn—if we can do that,” he said.

Woodard said if the city did look into a dam tear out, it would need to submit all new construction plans to

the DNR. And, he said, the city likely would have to do test bores in the wide, pond-like spot in the river above the Monterey Dam, where sediment has piled up in and along the river channel.

The dam's removal likely would include removing sediment and restoring the pond area, which would initially dry out and become a mudflat.

Woodard has said the city has looked at floodplain models to estimate the impact on river levels if the Monterey Dam was removed.

He said those models show that even though the dam holds back about 6 to 7 feet of water, its removal would only cause the river to drop a few inches upstream, near downtown.

Downstream, he said, the change would be “negligible.”

Sue Josheff, a DNR watershed manager who deals with river dams in southern part of the state, said if the dam were removed, river levels downstream of the dam would remain largely the same, because it would change only the rate at which water passes through—not the amount of water.

“Basically, what comes in goes out,” Josheff said.

She said a DNR dam engineer now is working with the city of Janesville and upper-level DNR supervisors to consider the city's proposal for a “phased” approach to repair the dam's spillways.

Josheff said the DNR hasn't been in specific talks with the city about removing the dam, and the DNR is not requiring or recommending its removal. She said the city could opt to do so as a local decision.

She said the city would be eligible for grants for the dam's removal if it takes that route, but its removal would require a DNR public hearing.