

## CITY OF WATERTOWN

Conservation Commission  
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To: Council President Mark Sideris

From: Watertown Conservation Commission

CC: Vice President Vincent Piccirilli, Councilors Nicole Gardner, Lisa Feltner, Anthony Palomba, Emily Izzo, John Airasian, John Gannon, City Manager George Proakis, Director of Planning and Development, Steve Magoon, Laurel Schwab, Susan Jenness

RE: Removal of the Watertown Dam

On October 12, 2022, members of the Conservation Commission discussed informally the removal of the Watertown Dam owned by the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR). Last fall, the MA Division of Ecological Restoration released a report prepared for them on the feasibility of removing the dam in Watertown. The removal of the dam has been championed by the Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) who has been encouraging the state to remove all of the dams along the Charles River. The removal of the dams would re-establish the rivers natural course and improve the ecological system along the Charles. Locally, there are four dams between Watertown Square and Moody Street in Waltham. The other upstream dams are at Bridge Street, the Bleachery Dam (behind the Star Market in Waltham), and the Moody Street Dam. Historically these dams were used to divert water to drive turbines for mills along the river. The use of water to power the dams has long since ceased yet the dams remain. The feasibility study evaluated the impacts on fish migrations and flooding if the Watertown Dam were removed.

There are number of benefits to removing the dam, even more so in conjunction with the dams upstream of Watertown. The benefits include:

- Allowing native fish to return to the upstream spawning areas, something that is not happening for all species now.
- Cooling of the water upstream of the dam by elimination of the stagnation behind the dam, making it more conducive for greater varieties of species to spawn in the river.

- Lowering of the baseline of the river allowing a greater volume for flood waters without extending beyond its current banks, thereby reducing flooding upstream of the dam.

There are some concerns with the removal of the Watertown Dam. They are:

- Potential for invasive plants filling in the current bank area to the new river course.
- Loss of potential future flood storage for downstream flood control. Although the Watertown Dam has a low-level outlet, current dam operations keep the outlet closed and operate a “run of river” dam. Thus, there is currently no flood storage provided by the dam as incoming waters simply flow over the top of the dam. Even if the low-level outlet were to open to drawdown the upstream impoundment before storms, the impoundment area is not large enough to provide meaningful floodwater retention. The impoundment does, however, contribute to upstream flooding. Nevertheless, consideration should be given to whether any potential future dam modifications could increase flood storage upstream of the dam and whether those hypothetical changes would be useful under climate change scenarios.
- The contaminated materials upstream of the dam will need to be properly handled and disposed.
- Potential for undermining the footings of the new pedestrian bridge.

All of these items were mentioned in the feasibility study and none were found to be particularly unusual or insurmountable challenges for a dam removal project.

Our members overwhelmingly agree with the ecological benefit of removing the Watertown Dam. It should be noted that everything to date is informational. The DCR has not yet filed an application to the Conservation Commission to remove the dam. When it does, there will be open meetings with residents to discuss the benefits and the impacts from the dam removal. Through Wetlands Protection Act permitting, the Conservation Commission would evaluate the project proposal in detail. If approved, the Conservation Commission would issue an Order of Conditions to ensure the best possible outcome for restoring this part of the Charles River.

Watertown Conservation Commission