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Springville dam project on track but with some hesitation from the community



Photo by Kellen M. Quigley

Several dozen members of the Springville community and from across Western New York gathered Jan. 29 in the Concord Town Hall for a meeting concerning the proposed project to lower Scoby Dam and add a fish ladder.

By Kellen M. Quigley

The proposed project to lower Scoby Dam on the Cattaraugus Creek is moving forward with plans by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but not without some hesitation by the people who live, work and play nearby.

Several dozen Springville area residents and those concerned about such a project's impact gathered Jan. 29 in the Concord Town Hall for a presentation by several officials involved in the development, environmental impact and health risk aspects of lowering the dam.

Project Manager Geoffrey Hintz with the Corps of Engineers said they have spent the past 10 years putting the project together with preliminary studies and planning.

Pending state and federal approval, the project is expected to go out to bid in August, Hintz said, with construction beginning that fall. If all goes according to plan, he said the project could be done by late 2021 or early 2022.

Hintz said a major concern in the community is the impact of possible nuclear contamination from **West Valley Development Project** upstream, which was previously tested about a decade ago.

"The determination at the time was there is no contamination of concern in the creek," he said. "The DEC partners said the work that we've done isn't sufficient and we want to do more samples down to the bottom of the impoundment and test that for contamination."

Geologist Bill Frederick with the Corps of Engineers explained the various testing processes and analyses performed in the creek between the **West Valley plant** ceased operation and the preparations for the project. The most recent samples showed little to no difference in radiation amounts in the water compared to above **West Valley**, all of which were below levels of concern.

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"The (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) essentially told us the sediment is a low-risk to no-risk profile for the radionuclide," Frederick said. "The 2018 sampling verified what we determined in 2012 and 2015, that there was no added risk to a construction worker, a recreational user or a farmer from sediments behind the dam."

Hints said other concerns are how the project is going to affect fishing, properties downstream, ice jams, and flooding.

"We've evaluated that over these years, we have detailed studies completed and the answer is there is no negative impact from changing that structure that is going to affect the properties downstream," he said.

Biologist James Markham with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation discussed the impact the dam would have for fisheries and fish passage on the creek. He said the DEC presented the plan last year for public comment and received 53 replies.

"That was a lot more than I thought we were going to get from that," he said. "Thirty-eight of those conveyed special concerns or recommendations, and we take those very seriously. Going through those 38 comments really boiled down to 17 general themes."

Markham said many of the themes were already addressed in the plan or had to be included, improved upon or added upon. Among those themes was keeping as much of the ecosystem as possible the same while allowing fish passage for various species from the lower to upper creek.

"Our management goal in the plan is to manage upper Cattaraugus Creek and its tributaries as a high-quality, year-round sports fishery," he said. "Some of the best catch rates we have in Lake Erie and let alone all of the Great Lakes come right from this creek."

Springville Mayor Bill Krebs said the village has been interested in the project since an initial meeting in 2013, adding that it's in the best interest of the Springville area for tourism and historical reasons.

Although the dam ceased producing electricity for the village in the late 1980s and the site was taken over by the county for a park in 1997, Krebs said Springville is still very emotionally connected to the dam.

Krebs said he's talked with a group from New York City who comes to Springville every year for fishing in the creek. He said the creek is also used for whitewater canoeing and rafting.

"There is a lot of visitors here looking for fun things to do in outdoor recreation," he said. "This is an important dam and important 30-acre site for the village and for Concord."

The existing dam was completed in 1924. It is roughly halfway up the 70-mile-long creek.