

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## Flow gently

### City should spend money on dam removal instead of fines

*Wednesday, November 14, 2007 3:51 AM*

Columbus has a chance to get rid of one of the low-head dams that plague area rivers and to do so at virtually no cost. City officials should seize this opportunity, even if it comes with some expenses for cleaning up the muck and debris left behind.

Removing the dam on the Olentangy River near W. 5th Avenue could be essentially free, because the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has said the city can pay for its share of the project with money that it otherwise owes the state in fines for repeated sanitary-sewer overflows.

Spending \$640,000 to remove a safety hazard that contributes to pollution and summer stagnation on a scenic river beats paying that money to a state agency.

Further, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is willing to pay \$1.18 million toward the project, estimated to cost \$1.82 million.

City officials haven't yet committed to removing the dam, built in 1935 to supply water to an Ohio State University power plant, because they're worried about possible additional costs, particularly cleanup costs for the junk and toxic materials that might be lurking in the riverbanks that would be exposed once the dam is removed and the river level falls.

But if there is junk or toxic material in the riverbank, it probably will have to be cleaned up sooner or later.

The city should explore all funding sources, such as state and federal agencies that have an interest in promoting clean and free-running waterways. Private, nonprofit groups might be able to help, as well.

This and other low-head-dam removals also could merit a place on the list of improvements the city will propose to voters through a bond-issue package next year.

The dams are a perennial safety hazard to boaters and children exploring the rivers. The roiling waters at the base of such a dam have been described as a "drowning machine," because people become trapped in the hydraulic pull. Most were built to trap water for long-defunct recreational or industrial purposes. Five city-owned dams on the Olentangy can't be removed easily because they cover sanitary-sewer lines that would be prohibitively expensive to replace.

The 5th Avenue dam creates further problems. In hot, dry summer weather, the water stagnates behind the dam. Pollution becomes more concentrated, killing fish, mussels and other wildlife. Occasional overflows from sanitary sewers back up, too, creating a stench that extends to the OSU campus.

Removing the dam will wash a lot of those problems away and be a step toward making the lower Olentangy as nice as the upper reaches, north of Worthington, which have been declared part of the state's scenic-river program.