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Dam removal meeting gets heated

Tue, 04/30/2013 - 10:47pm | Tracy Moss

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DANVILLE — In a hot meeting room of nearly 100 people at the David S. Palmer Arena on Tuesday night, emotions reached the boiling point when residents opposed to removing two river dams in Danville hijacked the speaker's podium to voice their opinions.

The incident occurred at an open-house-style meeting after officials with the Illinois Department of Natural Resource had finished a presentation, recommending partial or full removal of both dams. The city and state hosted the meeting in a room at the arena where the window air-conditioning units were turned off so the public could better hear the presentation.

At the close of the presentation, Ann Wells, a local fisherman opposed to dam removal, stepped to the front of the room and interrupted Doug Ahrens, the city's public works director, who had the floor at that moment, and demanded that opponents of the state's plan be allowed to make comments and ask questions publicly.

The format of the public meeting was for the state to make its presentation to the public all at once, followed by residents asking questions one-on-one with state officials in an exhibit area at the back of the meeting room and submitting any comments in written form.

Wells resisted Ahrens, who explained that the format of the meeting was already set.

Wells said "that's not how it's going to go," and she called to the podium another local fisherman, Sam Van Camp, also opposed to the removal of dams. The state is recommending removal for public-safety reasons following drowning deaths at the dams and to improve the ecology and recreational opportunities of the rivers.

Some in the audience shouted for Van Camp to be heard and others yelled in protest, but Ahrens reluctantly allowed Van Camp to go to the microphone to make his statement. Ahrens told the audience that the only comments that would be officially considered as the state makes its final report would be comments submitted in writing.

From the podium, Van Camp asked how many supported removing the dams and how many were opposed to removal, and the majority raised hands opposing removal. Van Camp went on to explain his, and other fishermen's, objections to removal, which include the fact that river depths will be lower above the dams, possibly eliminating motorized boat access to the rivers at times of the year when the river levels are lower.



Photo by: Rick Danzl/The News-Gazette
 Cyril Ostiguy examine depth charts on display at David S. Palmet Arena in Danville Tuesday April 30, 2013.



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He also addressed public safety concerns, expressing compassion for anyone who lost their lives, but continued, saying that "those numbers have been insignificant over time."

Reacting to that comment, Allyn Barnett rushed up the aisle toward the speaker's podium, shouting that his daughter died at that dam.

"There's nothing insignificant about that," yelled Barnett, whose daughter, Sandi Barnett, 24, drowned in 2003 after her canoe capsized at the dam on the Vermilion River. Barnett of Woodridge had traveled to Danville on Tuesday for the hearing on the dam removal, which he supports.

Barnett was intercepted before he reached the podium, but a few people in the audience shouted that his daughter should not have been there and her death was her fault.









Ms. Barnett and three friends, who were all living in Champaign-Urbana in 2003, had rented canoes at Kickapoo Landing in Kickapoo State Park and floated down the Middle Fork River, but missed the takeout point in the park and floated several miles beyond the park, eventually coming to the low-head dam on the Vermilion River, where their canoes capsized. The other three girls either made it to the bank or were rescued by emergency personnel that day.

Van Camp continued with his comments and apologized to Barnett. A few other opponents also went to the microphone and made statements that were eventually cut off by Mayor Scott Eisenhauer, even though a few in the audience continued demanding that comments and questions be taken publicly by city and state officials.

During their presentation, state officials said state money has been appropriated to do the work, and they made it clear in their presentation that their recommendation is partial removal of the dam on the Vermilion River and full removal of the dam on the North Fork River, which will improve safety at both dams. State officials also presented detailed information about how their plan will improve fish habitat even though the water levels will be lower in sections immediately above the dam.

IDNR Biologist Wes Cattoor said "the Middle Fork will be unchanged completely." He said the impacts to the river levels will not render useless the ramp at Ellsworth Park, which provides access to both rivers by motorized boats.

The final decision rests with the Danville City Council, because the city owns both dams. Eisenhauer told the audience that a final decision won't be made for a while, and state officials said that once the city makes a decision, it would be about a year before construction would start. Construction would take about 10 months, he said.

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