

By Lisa Hitchcock and Jason Kenyon

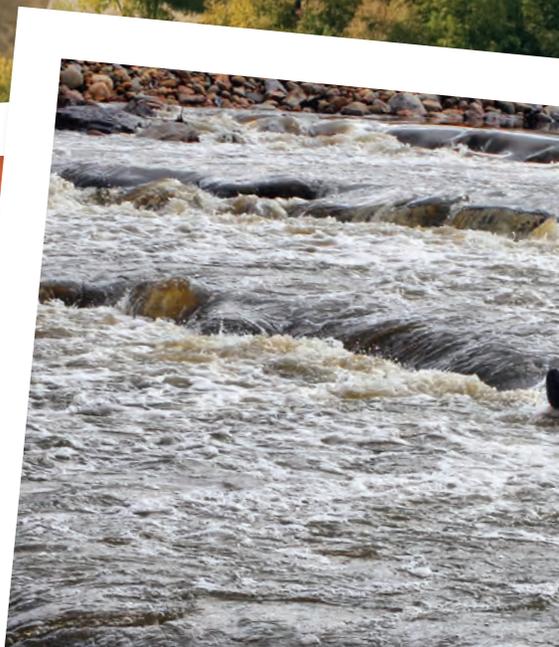
CHESANING DAM



IF YOU REMOVE IT,
THEY WILL COME



Chesaning
pop. 2,394



While the village of Chesaning's population has remained near 2,500 for decades, the Shiawassee River upstream of the village is teeming with new inhabitants. Following the removal of a local dam in 2009, residents have welcomed the steady return of walleye and other fish species to their natural habitat along the river. Man-made rapids, created after the dam removal to enable fish passage into 37 miles of historic habitat for spawning, have become a focal point for the community, bringing eco-tourism, recreational, and environmental benefits.

Built in 1863 to power the village's grist mill, the Chesaning Dam had deteriorated to the point where failure was imminent. Faced with increasing urgency to resolve the issue, the village hired Wade Trim to evaluate its options and investigate available funding alternatives. The evaluation looked at the costs and benefits of dam rehabilitation, as well as the feasibility of dam removal in conjunction with restoration of the river. When the village learned that funding might be available for removing the dam and improving the Shiawassee River in the process by restoring the natural river ecosystem, the community recognized the benefit of this alternative.

Community Enthusiasm

Positioning itself to pursue the funding support needed to bring this project to life, the village demonstrated their community's enthusiasm and willing-



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ness to invest in this river restoration by proactively funding the planning and design of the project. The village also created conceptual graphics and a presentation that effectively illustrated the end result to garner support. Once word got out that the community was looking to remove the dam and restore the Shiawassee River to allow fish passage, several regulatory agencies and private organizations endorsed this plan and demonstrated their financial commitment to achieving this shared goal. The village's considerable efforts garnered support from many entities including a \$900,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Clean Michigan Initiative, a \$99,400 stimulus grant through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a \$50,000 grant from the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network, a \$10,000 grant from Partners for Fish and Wildlife through the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, and a \$5,000 grant from the Saginaw Community Foundation. Local pledges from residents, including rock and boulder donations, totaled \$346,000.

Designed by Ellen River Partners in collaboration with the village and Wade Trim, the 10-year effort to remove the failing dam resulted in a 300-foot-long, man-made rock ramp with boulder arch weirs, just north of the M-57 bridge, that reestablished the river's unencumbered connection with the Saginaw River and Lake Huron. Not only did this design remove the current hazards caused by the dam, it also helped to stabilize the river channel and restore a nearly 150-year-old natural habitat. Furthermore, the project met the needs and desires of the community and environmental and wildlife protection agencies by restoring fish passage, creating a natural river habitat, and eliminating the long-term liabilities associated with a failing dam.

Return of Walleye

On April 17, 2014, a Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) survey captured 87 walleye upstream of the Chesaning rock ramp in 45 minutes of sampling, their most positive result to date. "We have proof that there is a high density of walleye downstream of

Chesaning, probably in the 10,000 to 30,000 range in the spring,” says Joe Leonardi, an MDNR Fisheries biologist. “Our upstream results indicate walleye are passing the rock ramp into new habitat for spawning that was not available when the dam was present.”

“Fishing in the area has increased tremendously,” says Village President Joseph Sedlar. “We are even thinking about starting a walleye fishing contest in town.”



While buzz about the walleye continues to travel through the region, the village is looking at additional opportunities to leverage their river investment to increase quality of life

for residents and attract visitors. “We are strengthening the connection between our downtown and the large amount of river frontage we have,” continues Sedlar. “A new, four-day River Days Festival will be held this summer, and we will be starting a downtown farmers market with daily events.”

Enjoying the Riverside

Making the riverfront more accessible to local users is key. The village is adding a new pedestrian bridge over the river this year to provide an alternate route to M-57 and to tie both sides of the river together. The bridge will feature a rapids overlook area with ADA accessibility. Since the dam was removed, a sandy beach has been naturally deposited by the river on its east side, making the river more approachable for people who want to wade in or fish. Canoeing and kayaking through the rapids has also become popular. The Riverfront Grille, a local restaurant and event center that opened along the river when the dam was removed, is making the most of their riverside location by enhancing outdoor dining space and holding outdoor activities such as volleyball tournaments.

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Future Trail System Expansion

Improving regional connections to the river is also a focus. Saginaw County’s Recreation Plan identifies expansion of their rail trail system to Chesaning as a major objective to improve non-motorized connectivity in the region, and capitalize on the riverfront and accessible, “hometown” feel of the community. The village has created a nature trail and planted trees along the riverbank to enhance usability and the future connection to the rail trail. River quality improvements have also been made upstream of the rapids, including tree revetments and natural plantings to help stabilize the riverbank.

The M-57 bridge over the Shiawassee River, slated for reconstruction by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) in 2016, offers clear views of the rock ramp and village parks for the 9,600 vehicles that pass through each day. The village is looking forward to working with MDOT to ensure this critical site for advertising its eight-tiered water rapids is a pedestrian-friendly and aesthetically-pleasing gateway to the community. The village’s continued investment in its river’s health and use will be a draw for visitors and residents for years to come. 

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