

## Officials to get help from McKee on potential future uses of Potter Hill Mill site

By Dale P. Faulkner Sun staff writer  
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WESTERLY — Officials are hoping a visit from Gov. Daniel J. McKee to the Potter Hill Mill property will help spur support and ideas on what to do with it.

"I'm hoping we can talk about what can be done at the property," said state Rep. Brian Patrick Kennedy, a Westerly resident who represents the 38th state house district, which includes parts Westerly and Hopkinton.

Kennedy, who asked the governor to visit the mill property, said he expects both McKee and Terrence Gray, the acting director of the state Department of Environmental Management, to walk the property on Monday afternoon.

The Westerly Town Council recently directed the lawyer who is handling the mill receivership case to ask the judge presiding over it to allow the town to take ownership of the mill property, which includes a dam across the Pawcatuck River. The council petitioned the property into receivership in 2019 as a means to finally get the dilapidated mill buildings taken down.

The move toward the town taking ownership of the mill follows several months of on-and-off discussions about the dam. In February, the council took steps that resulted in the town withdrawing from a grant-funded effort to restore the river to its natural state and improving fish passage. After an environmental engineering firm recommended complete removal of the dam, the council instead selected an option that would have lowered the dam and required construction of an extensive and expensive nature-like pool and riffle fishway.

Kennedy was a consistent opponent of the plan for complete removal of the dam and discussed it with the governor.

"When I first asked him to consider seeing the mill, I told him I was very concerned about potential changes to the river and the lives of people who live along the river," Kennedy said.

Members of the grant team have said they would like to work toward a compromise approach that lowers the dam somewhat but does not require as much work as the option selected by the Town Council. They have also raised questions about the stability of the dam, a point that Kennedy disputes.

"It is not a dam that is considered to be a high risk. ... It is a low hazard. I don't think the town needs to be too concerned," Kennedy said.

Opponents of the plan to remove the dam have said it would narrow the river, detract from the look of their river-front property, and potentially harm their drinking water wells. A dam has been in place at the mill location since the 1700s.

The town has been trying to get the mill buildings taken down or renovated since at least 1980. Officials have long expressed concern that individuals, especially children, could suffer serious injuries while exploring the unstable buildings that are falling into the river.

The long-sought goal of removing the mill buildings appears to be coming into clearer focus. In September, the Town Council approved using \$400,000 in federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds toward the cost of removing the mill buildings and, more recently, John Dorsey, the lawyer who is serving as special master in the receivership case, agreed to help the town move through the permitting process for the demolition project.

The council and Dorsey have talked about potential future use of the mill property, which is adjacent to a DEM small boat launch, as a public park.

"Development of the mill as a recreation area is probably a very good option," Kennedy said.

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