

Acquisition of Potter Hill Mill property moves closer

By Dale P. Faulkner Sun staff writer
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The former Potter Hill Mill now abandoned in Westerly, on Monday, Sept. 27, 2021. Residents are concerned over the proposal to remove the Potter Hill Dam. | Tim Martin, The Westerly Sun

Tim Martin

WESTERLY — The town should soon own the former Potter Hill Mill property, including the dam that spans the Pawcatuck River, and the mill buildings themselves should be torn down no later than sometime in the spring, officials say.

John Dorsey, the lawyer who is serving as special master in the mill property receivership case, told the Town Council during its meeting on Monday that he was working with Town Attorney William Conley Jr. to "effectuate conveyance of a deed to effectuate transfer of the property to the town."

According to Dorsey, a Superior Court judge "accepted" a resolution approved by the council in April, calling for the town to take ownership of the mill property, including the dam, and for the receivership to remain open after the property transfer to allow Dorsey to work on the approvals and permitting that will be necessary to demolish the buildings.

The council previously agreed to have Town Manager Shawn Lacey authorize an agreement with Pare Engineering to inspect the dam. The Lincoln-based firm will conduct a visual inspection, including the use of underwater cameras, of the dam and related structures. The inspection is expected to cost \$15,000 and will be conducted by dam and hydrology experts, according to a letter from the company to Lacey. The inspection, according to the letter, will be conducted during "normal" water levels. An experienced diver will take still images and video of the dam's spillway during low flow conditions because of safety concerns.

Pare will prepare a report on the inspection that will discuss areas in need of immediate repair or maintenance and estimated costs for both. The dam was first built in the 1780s. It is unclear when it was last inspected.

Council President Sharon Ahern noted that the dam is designated as a "low hazard" by the state Department of Environmental Management and said Pare's study should "confirm there is no immediate risk to satisfy a few councilors and I believe residents."

Caswell Cooke Jr. clarified the meaning of DEM's "low hazard" designation, saying it means that failure of the dam would not be life-threatening.

"A low hazard dam doesn't mean it's in good shape," Cooke said.

Dorsey called Cooke's explanation of low hazard, "a good summary."

The inspection by Pare will be paid for by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. In January the council voted for the town to stop working under a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration aimed at removing the dam to improve fish passage, reduce flood risks and restore the natural flow of the river. The

town, Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the DEM, the Southern Rhode Island Conservation District, the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association and the Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association were all partners in the grant project.

The vote by the council to discontinue involvement with the grant came after residents who live along the river in the area of the dam and state leaders said removal of the dam would rob them of boating opportunities and potentially damage shallow-depth drinking water wells. Members of the council also expressed concern that they had not been properly informed of the scope of the project.

The council previously designated \$400,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds for demolition of the mill buildings. On Monday Dorsey reminded the council that the \$400,000 figure was based on rough estimates he received during discussions with demolition experts.

The council approved petitioning the property into receivership in 2019 as a means to finally get the dilapidated mill buildings taken down. Town officials had been trying since at least the 1980s to address the dilapidated mill buildings.

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