

Damn the dam To free the creek

By [Mike Masterson](#)

Posted: March 1, 2015 at 2:01 a.m.

A determined group in Benton County is hoping the city fathers of Bentonville abandon their idea to rebuild the leaky and chronically repaired dam at Bella Vista Lake and thereby set Little Sugar Creek free to again flow freely through the community.

Friends of Little Sugar Creek, led by Greg Van Horn, says the dam that creates the slender mile-long reservoir lake was declared as "failed" long before it was damaged by a flood event in 2011. And it's underlain by fractured karst limestone and close to a major basement fault, according to Dr. John Van Brahana, a former Geological Survey scientist and geosciences professor at the University of Arkansas.

Today, the matter is just over a week into a 30-day public comment period before the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "And if people don't respond in this period, then the rebuilt dam project is likely to be determined as having no significant [environmental] impact and therefore approved," says Van Horn.

That would be far from the truth, he added. The group's primary objections to the environmental assessment submitted as part of the city's announced plan to rebuild the dam are that they see that report as biased, nonfactual and misleading in several areas.

Van Horn contends the assessment argues the lake should be retained because there are no other recreational lakes in the area. "This is not true," he says. "Almost every waterway in the area has a man-made impoundment, including Beaver Lake, which is no more than 20 minutes from Bentonville. And there are 20 dams in Benton County. If it flowed, it was dammed."

Those include the seven lakes in nearby Bella Vista and Lake Atalanta in Rogers.

Van Horn says the assessment also claims the lake is a valuable recreational asset to the community. Yet a city ordinance makes it unlawful to swim in the lake. "Sedimentation and enormous algae blooms make it inhospitable to aquatic species, as well as an eyesore, which makes the adjacent park less appealing," Van Horn says.

Then Section 3.3 of the assessment contends a restriction exists in the deed to the lake property given by the Bentonville/Bella Vista Trailblazers Association to the city in 2006 that would make repair or replacement of the dam impossible. Van Horn says a review of that deed shows no such restrictions exist.

Van Horn says the assessment claims there's no viable option but to replace the ailing dam. "This isn't true, as shown by the proposed stream restoration shown in a landscape concept drawing."

The list of questionable contradictions continues. The report, Van Horn says, states there is no unstable karst geology involved in the dam or impoundment, a statement refuted by Brahana's examination and report sent to Bentonville's mayor two weeks ago.

He goes on to say there's also no detailed biological survey submitted of Little Sugar Creek from either above or below the dam. That means the stated conclusion that there's no impact to the

stream's ecology is not supported by factual findings or documentation from respected or credentialed stream ecologists.

Van Horn and his group, with more than 200 social media followers and rapidly attracting support from other groups, say the job to complete the environmental assessment was not awarded through an advertised bid procedure. Instead, the city chose the CP&Y firm from Texas to complete the report and "directed them to come to the conclusion that dam replacement was the only option," says Van Horn.

Those who join Friends of Little Sugar Creek in their concerns, or otherwise, can express their opinions within the next two weeks to alan.hermley@fema.dhs.gov.

In essence, Van Horn, his group and others see a restored free-flowing Little Sugar Creek as far preferable for recreation and enjoyment than shelling out untold tax dollars to rebuild this dam on karst-riddled ground near a fault line, especially when swimming there is disallowed and it tends to become algae-choked and less than appealing or scenic in warmer weather.

"Right now, FEMA has yet to approve funding, although several city leaders have indicated they have a good chance of receiving them under the disaster assistance program if FEMA approves the flawed [environmental assessment]," says Van Horn. "We're hoping FEMA recognizes all the flaws ... and the fact that the sole reason for rebuilding or repairing the dam rather than freeing the beautiful stream is recreational, which certainly doesn't constitute an emergency."

He says he's encouraged by a recent reply from one councilman to his group's recent letter (as well as Brahana's report) to the Bentonville mayor and council. The alderman said he is interested in meeting to learn more about the dam's history and the controversial environmental assessment. "I'm glad it didn't fall on deaf ears," says Van Horn.

It strikes me that the Bentonville council and mayor would be well-served to rethink the approach of bending over backwards for a federal grant to rebuild this dam when so many others out here can see the merits of opening up and developing the recreational opportunities and scenic beauty a free-flowing stream invariably brings to any community. Just sayin', my friends.

-----V-----

Mike Masterson's column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.