

Headline: IS THAT DAM HYDROPOWER WORTH IT?

Sub-Head: NAYSAYERS CITE COST, POSSIBLE NANKIN MILLS
CONTAMINANTS

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Pub-Date: 12/24/2006

Memo: PLYMOUTH CANTON NORTHVILLE; SEE LIVONIA PG. 3 ALSO

Correction:

Text: My idea for putting Wayne County's four former Henry Ford-built hydroelectric power dams back to work cranking out amperes was just too much hot water for two readers who think the concept's time has come - and gone.

First, there was the e-mail from Bill Craig of Livonia, a former Detroit Edison power plant operator who's president of the Holliday Nature Preserve Association and cochair of the Rouge River Remedial Action Plan Advisory Council. Too costly, Craig says.

Then there was the e-mail I received from Fred Brenner, manager of grounds for the University of Michigan-Dearborn 1982-2001. I wrote about how one of Ford's two generators at his Fair Lane Manor is creating electricity and helping defray UM's electricity bills.

Not likely, thinks Brenner: "The restoration and preservation of this historical treasure should be viewed as just that. It made no money. The hours that we put into just keeping the trash rack on the headrace free of leaves and debris in the fall of the year cost more than the value of the electricity produced."

Craig sent me a long list of reasons why you couldn't possibly reactivate those dams.

First, there may be PCB and other toxic chemical contamination at one of the dams, Nankin Mills.

"So, anything to do with the Middle Rouge dams would require close inspection for contaminants = \$," Craig wrote. He means it would cost too much money to find out the lakes aren't polluted with toxics, and it would cost even more to remove contaminants if any were found.

"The Nankin Mill turbine would require dredging flume, extensive repairs or replacement of ALL equipment, upgrading to modern specifications and questions of historical classification," wrote Craig. Also, the Newburgh Lake "dam and facility would need extensive upgrading - \$\$\$\$.

"So, first, costs would be prohibitive. Where would Wayne County get any start-up funds?"

The naysayers don't bug David Robbins. He's chief of planning for Wayne County Parks, and the idea of making those old Ford hydro dams produce electricity is "close to my heart," he told me.

He's talking to hydropower engineers in western states and the feedback is encouraging, he says. Based on the headwaters and the flow of water in the Middle Rouge, he's learned that "we have substantial potential energy that we can generate."

But he's not recommending reuse of Ford-era generators. Rather, the dams would be equipped with state-of-the-art turbines and generators that are much more efficient than anything available nearly a century ago to Ford and Edison.

As to pollution, "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality with their permitting process will ferret out any potential problem," Robbins said.

Electricity generated by hydropower "has a beneficial use in terms of lowering the noxious emissions and greenhouse gases generated by coal-fired plants," said Robbins.

As for funding, I called for copying what Ann Arbor did a couple of decades ago when it refurbished two old Detroit Edison hydro plants. The city issued revenue bonds that paid for installing state-of-the-art generators and dam-control equipment. Sale of electricity pays for the bonds.

Such a deal: Water power, a renewable resource, could actually finance an environmental cleanup.

"The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality with their permitting process will ferret out any potential problem." David Robbins, chief of planning for Wayne County Parks

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Caption:

Illustration:

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: CFP; COMMUNITY FREE PRESS

Page: 3CN

Keywords: waterpower

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