

# ELK RAPIDS NEWS

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Rugg Pond concrete spillway feeding into Rapid River. Photos by Mark McAlpine

## The future of Rugg Pond

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For the past five years, the Kalkaska County Board of Commissioners has been discussing future options for the Rugg Pond Natural Area. On October 16, 2024, the board took large steps forward with a long-term plan to remove the historic dam that created Rugg Pond and return the area to the natural flow of the Rapid River, an important tributary to the Chain of Lakes.

The Rugg Pond Natural Area is located between Rapid City and Kalkaska on the Rapid River and accessible from Valley Road. The pond was formed in 1905 by the creation of a dam and power plant built by Ambrose E. Palmer, founder of Kalkaska Light and Power Company, on a site where the Little Rapid River meets the Rapid River. Consumer Power purchased the dam and power plant from Kalkaska Light and Power in 1950 and continued to operate the power plant until 1953 when it was sold to Kalkaska County for \$1. The county decommissioned the power plant in 1953 following that purchase. The US Army Corps of Engineers condemned the dam in 1980. That action generated local action with the formation of the Rugg Pond Natural Area and creation of repair plans to save the area for use by area residents.

The 18-mile-long Rapid River is part of the Elk River Chain of Lakes Watershed (ERCOL). It is listed as the longest and fastest flowing river within the watershed and flows through Rapid River Township, Cold Springs Township and Clearwater Township before emptying into Torch River between Torch and Skegemog lakes. There are several access sites for the public between Elk Rapids and Kalkaska. The state acquired a one-mile stretch of river downstream (south) of the dam now known as Seven Bridges. The 314 acres includes trails and a boardwalk that wanders over the four bridges existing today that span the Rapid River. Seven Bridges is managed for the state by the Grand Traverse

Regional Land Conservancy (GTRLC). Freedom Park, located

in Clearwater Township, provides another access point on Rapid River one mile north of Rapid City.

The Rugg Pond review began in 2019 following a Michigan Department of Environmental, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) inspection report that identified the Rugg Pond dam with a “high hazard potential” tag. That designation required an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) prepared and submitted to the state dam safety program. The EGLE inspection report identified slope erosion near the pipe spillway and concrete deterioration on the inlet box for that spillway. It also noted a continuing increase in pond sediment. According to EGLE, a sudden dam failure, as witnessed in other parts of the state, would threaten large areas downstream as the water and sediments are released. Kalkaska County would be liable for damages to property and environmental damages should that happen.

While the Covid years and funding problems limited an immediate large-scale project by Kalkaska County, a steering committee was formed to continue the review, conduct engineering and environmental studies by the Spicer Group, and develop alternate recommendations to bring Rugg Pond into dam safety compliance. The results of that work, with options, were presented to the board of commissioners on April 17 of this year and to a public forum in June. The four options presented included dam improvements with dredging, a drawdown without dredging, dam improvements without dredging, and dam plus spillway removal.

In September, the county passed a resolution to pursue the dam removal option. On October 16, the board of commissioners passed several motions to begin the process of removing the Rugg Pond dam and allowing the Rapid River to flow as it did 120 years ago. Kalkaska County authorized the development of an administrative service agreement with Conservation Resource Alliance (CRA) to work on their behalf to secure a \$200,000 MDNR grant to be used for engineering designs and permits required for the dam removal. CRA was also authorized to submit a proposal to the EGLE Dam Risk Reduction Grant Program for Rugg Pond. CRA is a Michigan 501c3 non-profit, headquartered in Traverse City, dedicated to protecting watersheds in northwest Michigan. Their 2022-2024 work has included stream crossing improvements, multiple dam removals, streambank stabilizations, and habitat improvements.

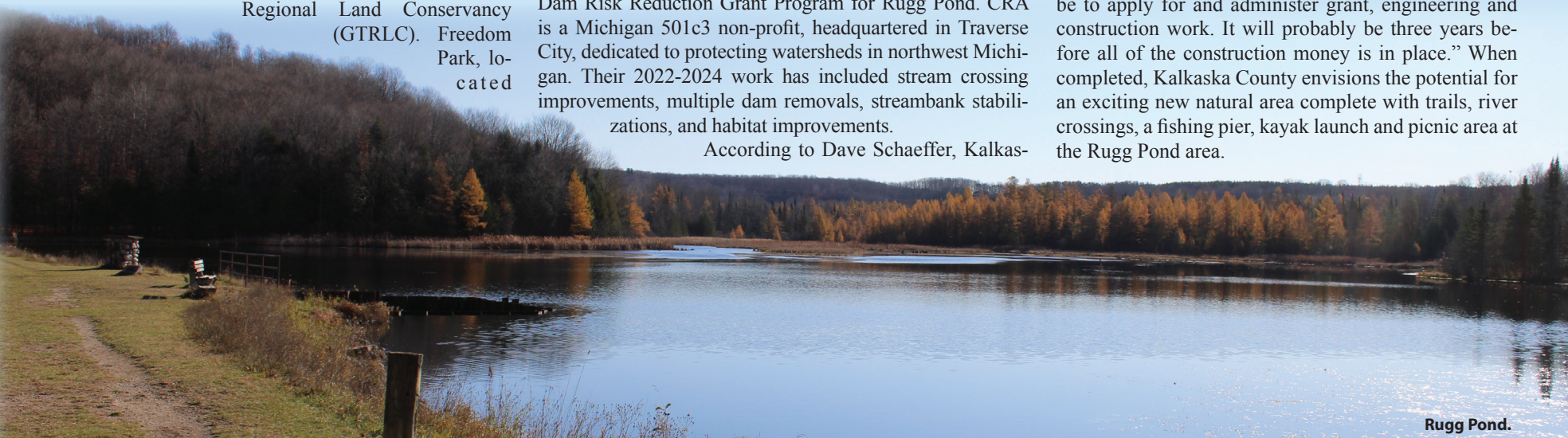
According to Dave Schaeffer, Kalkas-

ka County administrator and CFO, the full fundraising, dam removal and restoration project is expected to take three years to complete. “We are now transitioning into the design engineering phase,” Schaeffer said. “This winter, we will be going out for RFPs and RFQs to formally onboard an engineer. In order to be able to get the big grants needed for this project, you must first show the cost for removal of the dam.”

Schaeffer expects most of the local water resource organizations, the road commission, and Trout Unlimited to be involved in the project. Dr. Bryan Burroughs, Executive Director of Michigan Trout Unlimited, has already provided his expertise in the public forums. Burroughs obtained his Master’s and Ph.D. in Fisheries & Wildlife Science from Michigan State and has expertise in dam removal and river restoration. “We are battling the nostalgia of the dam versus the reality of the situation,” Schaeffer explained. “Burroughs participated in the public hearings with studies of recent Rapid River fish counts and presented expectations that the fish count could increase threefold after dam removal due to the increase of new habitat downstream.”

According to Schaeffer, the design engineering phase will investigate the natural Rapid River bed. The plan would call for the dredging of sediment from the pond and the reuse of that sediment to build the new riverbank. “This is not going to be a contentious project,” Schaeffer said. “There are not many residential homes along the stretch we are working on. This is strictly environmental to reduce the potential liability for Kalkaska county if Rugg Pond dam breaks.”

CRA has already applied for the DNR Fish Habitat Grant program. A pre-proposal was completed in October. The county will know on Friday, November 15 if they qualify for the full grant program. Another pre-proposal for the EGLE dam restoration grant program is due at the end of November. The county hopes to find out in January if they qualify for that grant. Once the county confirms their qualification for the full grants, they will onboard an engineer for the project. “This will be a multi-year project to cobble together the grant funding,” Schaeffer said. “The main role of CRA will be to apply for and administer grant, engineering and construction work. It will probably be three years before all of the construction money is in place.” When completed, Kalkaska County envisions the potential for an exciting new natural area complete with trails, river crossings, a fishing pier, kayak launch and picnic area at the Rugg Pond area.



Rugg Pond.

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