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At long last, Allendale Dam will once again hold back river

• Breached in 1991, the dam on the Woonasquatucket River is being rebuilt, partly to hold back dioxin-contaminated soil upstream around the Centredale Manor apartment complex.

BY RICHARD SALIT
Journal Staff Writer

NORTH PROVIDENCE -- The Woonasquatucket River meanders listlessly through the expanse of mud and grass flats before arriving at the Allendale Dam.

It was a decade ago next month that the century-old wooden timbers that supported the earthen structure gave way in the middle of the night, allowing Allendale Pond to disappear in the darkness like bath water escaping down a drain.

Scott Miller stands on the bank of the river as water rushes past the debris clinging to the intact sections of the dam. But he isn't here to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the breaching of the dam, as a gaggle of Canada geese flies overhead and the sunfish swim in the shallows a short distance downstream.

Instead, Miller is overseeing the long-awaited reconstruction of the dam. The project began about a month ago and is expected to be finished by the end of the year, except for the landscaping work that will wait until the spring.

"The goal is to rebuild the Allendale Dam and fill this back up to a pond, which is a minor river right now," Miller said.

After the 106-foot dam breached on Nov. 26, 1991, there was a great deal of planning and preparation for a replacement. But the discovery of dioxin and other contaminants upstream complicated matters.

The troublesome levels of toxins in the Woonasquatucket led the Environmental Protection Agency to cordon an area around the Centredale Manor senior apartment complex in 1999. A year later, the EPA designated the area a Superfund site, making it eligible for federal assistance.

While the discovery of dioxin has been anything but welcome news, it has assured the replacement of the dam. That's because EPA officials are counting on a new dam to help reduce public exposure to dioxin-contaminated river sediments.

A new dam would allow Allendale Pond to return to historic levels, submerging about 28,000 cubic yards of tainted sediments. An estimated 415 cubic yards left exposed will have to be excavated and taken to an incinerator. The EPA describes the \$1.8-million job as an interim measure, pending studies that will allow the agency to make final recommendations about the future of the Superfund site.

The EPA awarded a contract for the dam reconstruction to LEA-Cianci Inc., of Plainville, Conn., which employs Miller, the project director. On a recent afternoon, while accompanied by EPA officials Dick Boynton and Anna Krasko, Miller, explained the project to visitors, including Eugenia Marks, of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island.

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Miller said that the new dam will be made of concrete and, like the old one, will serve as a spillway. It will have a steel gate with two positions, opened or closed, to help control the water level.

Marks asked whether a "fish ladder" would be built to help fish migrate upstream around the dam. Miller said one was being designed with state money, but that no money was allocated yet for its construction.

Miller said the 13-foot high dam will be modestly realigned during the project. While one end will remain in its original position, the other will be moved five feet downstream, Miller said. That will help cut down on how much sediment must be disturbed, he said, and allow the wooden pilings of the old dam to be buried under gravel, soil and a top layer of large rocks.

The dam reconstruction will cost about \$500,000, with another \$500,000 going toward the disposal of sediments excavated in the process. Following excavation, the sediments will be contained in an area at the end of Allendale Avenue while drying. It will take about two weeks, or 20 to 25 truckloads, to transport the material away, said Miller, who described the disruption to neighbors as "minimal."

The removal of these sediments will be done separately from those that would be left exposed after Allendale Pond rises, Boynton said. That work has been postponed until next spring, he said. LEA-Cianci is negotiating to do that work as well. It will require much more intensive excavating and trucking, Boynton said.

Meanwhile, it's so long to the old dam, whose exact age is hard to pin down. The earliest state record of the dam is an 1886 inspection report. The dam was built to help harness the power of the river for the Allendale Mill, built in 1822 and progressively converted to condominiums.

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