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## Dam destruction part of Wildcat Creek's revival

**By Scott Smith**

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The water upstream from the old Continental Steel dam looks almost stagnant. The streambed is deep, and the surface untroubled.

But the lack of rills and whitewater along that stretch of the Wildcat Creek troubles Garry Hill, a founding member of the Wildcat Guardians advocacy group.

"Any kind of old, small dam like that does nothing but create an unnatural situation in the streambed," Hill said Tuesday. "The sediment collected behind the dam becomes a collection of everything a community puts into a river."

Remove the dam, and the creek will return to its natural channel, Hill said. The stagnant smells upstream at Foster Park will disappear. Small rapids will begin to appear where before everything was placid.

Next month, Hill will be on hand to witness the destruction of the concrete structure, which now sits in the middle of the Wildcat along Park Road.

The dam sits about midway between Markland Avenue and the confluence of the Wildcat and Kokomo creeks, and is easily visible from the Markland Avenue bridge.

Tuesday, water was flowing over a small section of the dam, which rises about 6 to 7 feet from the streambed. Immediately downstream, the low July water level allowed numerous rocks to poke above the surface of the water.

When contractors destroy the dam next month, Hill said, the water level will even out. The rocks will submerge, and items long buried upstream may emerge. Some may require removal by the Wildcat Guardians, the environmental group responsible for hundreds of Wildcat streambed cleanups over the years.

City engineer Carey Stranahan said getting rid of the dam will simply be a matter of knocking a hole in the structure. All of the water will flow through the hole, and very quickly, the rest of the dam will be exposed. A hoe ram — basically a jackhammer attached to a backhoe — will take out most of the concrete.

Stranahan said destroying the dam will serve two purposes, creating a recreational opportunity and improving stream water quality.

The Guardians already have a grant to create a canoe launch near the Continental Dam, and plan to cruise along the stream as it travels westward.

Second, the dam removal will increase the turbidity of the water in the stream, allowing more oxygen into the water, and increasing water quality. Stagnation and sediment buildup are the enemies of a clean stream.

Built in the early 20th century, the dam was either used to divert cooling water to the Continental Steel operations, and/or to generate hydro-electric power, according to local lore.

But in its years sitting next to the old steel mill, the dam also collected a huge amount of sediment.

Last year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spent months removing contaminated sediment from the creeks bordering the former Continental Steel Main Plant site, including just upstream of the Continental Dam. Numerous toxic chemicals and metals were trapped in the sediment.

That's why contractors will have to set up traps downstream, to catch silt once the dam starts coming down, Stranahan said.

Bids for the project are due before the Kokomo Board of Public Works & Safety Aug. 12, and a contract

could be awarded the following week.

The Continental Dam is one of three structures that impede navigation of the stream through Kokomo.

The first dam sits just north of where Carter Street crosses over the Wildcat, and is owned by the Indiana American Water Co. There are no plans to touch that dam.

About a quarter mile downstream from that dam lies the massive "Crystal Street Dam," which very few Kokomo residents have ever seen.

It sits completely surrounded by the operations of the OmniSource metal recycling firm, and can't be seen from any public thoroughfare, including the dead-end Crystal Street.

In low water, Hill said, it's easy to simply stop above the dam, get out of the canoe, jump down the dam and drag the canoe over.

In high water, he said, "the entire width of the dam is a boiling hydraulic."

"It's extremely dangerous for any river traveler to be anywhere near it" when the river is up, Hill said.

"I do not know why Kokomo hasn't experienced a fatality at that dam; it's just pure luck someone hasn't perished in the backdraft behind that dam."

The safer the creek becomes, Hill said, the more people are likely to enjoy it. And the more enjoyment the creek provides, the less likely people are to abuse one of the state's true scenic waterways.

Getting rid of the old concrete dam along Park Road may not seem like much, but to Hill, it's a new beginning.

"You could say I've wanted that dam out all my life," he said.