

Cambridge reverses course on Riverside Park dam

NEWS Mar 07, 2018 by [Jeff Hicks](#) Waterloo Region Record



Cambridge city council voted 8-0 on Tuesday night against a recommendation to rip out the Riverside Park Dam. - Peter Lee , Record staff file photo

CAMBRIDGE — Tear it down, a city-led team of environmental and engineering professionals concluded. Rip out the 128-year-old Riverside Park Dam and naturalize the Speed River. Perform radical dam-removal surgery on the plump mill pond heart of a flour mill town and risk rendering its pleasing vistas unrecognizable. And what did city council say in response? "We have the right to say no," Mayor Doug Craig said as applause dominated a 100-spectator meeting of the general committee. "And I'm saying no. I'm saying we rebuild the dam." Or the city might fix the crumbling dam, whose imminent failure is still awaited 10 years after being declared an impending disaster. One way or the other — after an 8-0 vote splashed water all over the recommendation to rip out the dam after a six-year, \$340,000 environmental assessment study — a dam will remain.

Councillors pledged, if the dam must fall, a new version will rise to take its place and honour its historic predecessor in the middle of a nationally celebrated park so dear to the city's fishing-pole soul. So what if it takes more time, as the mayor hinted, or ends up costing \$5 million or \$8.6 million. Costs be — well, dammed. "I don't care what the cost is," said Connie Perchaluk, a former Preston resident who recently moved to Kitchener. "If you need another taxpayer, I'll move back to Cambridge." So this was sudden victory for the persistent Save-the-Dam forces, all decked out for triumph, flashing the occasional red Preston pride T-shirt and yellow bow-tie.

It only took a thousand-member Facebook group and a four-thousand-signature petition and attendance at what seemed like an endless array of public meetings that often pointed to the same maddening conclusion. Always, it felt like the orphaned dam — beloved by residents of Preston and beyond but disowned by the heirs of the still-operating flour mill it was built to serve across King Street — was doomed to be bulldozed. The city may not own the dam but has taken ownership of its fate. Now, the dam is praised, and not so near to being razed. "I'm delighted that council finally saw the light," said Carol Thorman, a passionate dam defender from Preston. "I'm a little disappointed they didn't give the same direction to staff years ago."

The authors of the dam's demise were ordered to go back for a rewrite and re-evaluation that gives the dam's heritage, tourism and cultural value more weight this time around. The study, found lacking in those areas of assessment by councillors, must be completed and filed. There's no way around environment ministry rules. But the report's preferred alternative of naturalizing the river will not fly with this council, facing an election in October. It may be better for fish passage or the wavy-rayed lampmussel and silver shiner or flood control, but the people who flooded councillors with their save-the-dam messages appear to have won out. Not all speakers on Tuesday were dam supporters.

"The natural river was here long before the dam and has a natural beauty all its own," argued Brad Hall of the city's environmental advisory committee. "The naturalized river will be a great place to make new memories." Maybe so. But Preston's sentimental heart beats with political thunder. Generations who've enjoyed Riverside Park and its dam-created mill pond insist that generations more should get to experience the same lazy-river tranquility. Logically, there is no need for a dam any more. The flour mill doesn't need it. Naturalization makes perfect sense. The hard facts make it seem like a slam dunk, Coun. Donna Reid conceded. Yet, the dam wins. "Sometimes the obvious choice is not the best choice," Reid said. "Sometimes, the best option is guided by the heart."

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