

TIMELINE: The history of the Howson Dam debate in Wingham

Over six years ago, a citizen's committee began petitioning municipal council to repair the Howson Dam. As of now, no significant repairs have been done.

NEWS 10:00 AM by [Kelsey Bent](#) Wingham Advance Times



This is an up close look at the deterioration of the Howson Dam structure. -
Kelsey Dunbar/Metroland

NORTH HURON — The Howson Dam has been a resurfacing discussion in the North Huron council chambers since 2016, or even earlier.

There has been a dam standing at the north end of town for over 155 years. The current dam was built in 1921 — 98 years ago.

It is fair to assume it is one of the oldest pieces of infrastructure in the town.

An examination of the concrete by Atkinson Davis Inc. in 1984 deemed the structure unfit for repair work, however no notable work has been done until 2015 and the associated bridge has been closed since 1999.

Unfortunately, it has seen little maintenance and been allowed to deteriorate over the last 50 years, until the recent repair investigations.

Here is a timeline of the past few years of how North Huron has ended up where it is now with the Howson Dam.

Feb. 23, 2016:

Council voted in a budget meeting to include an Environmental Assessment (EA) at the cost of up to \$80,000 in the 2016 budget, with funds coming from the Howson Dam reserve fund.

The cost of approximately \$80,000 for the EA was compared to the over \$3 million cost of a repair project, and the cost of removing the dam at approximately \$1.1 million, which would be inflated by two to three per cent every year after their decision.

Ultimately council voted to take the EA route to ensure they were making the best decision possible before taking on the costs of repairs.

Aug. 2, 2016:

Council awarded the Howson Dam EA to GSS Engineering Consultants Ltd. The Owen Sound engineering firm won the request for proposal with the highest scoring proposal received, that ranked companies according to their experience, methodology and proposed work plan among others qualifications.

The total estimated cost of the EA, proposed by GSS Engineering Consultants Ltd. is \$88,815 excluding HST and the director of public works at the time said the assessment is expected to be completed by the end of the year (2016).

An additional \$9,000 was taken from the Howson Dam. The projected balance of the dam reserve at that time was to be approximately \$121,000.

Sept. 28, 2016:

There was standing room only available in the North Huron council chambers as concerned citizens attended the public information meeting for the Howson Dam EA. Two presentations were given that night as the number of citizens filled the council chambers twice.

The environmental assessment project manager said public input will have a bearing on the assessment when they are measuring impacts. Over one third of the town signed a petition to get the dam cosmetically refurbished and to raise the water levels.

Feb. 13, 2017:

The municipality submitted to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry a Species at Risk (SAR) application, in the week of Feb. 13.

Mar. 13, 2017:

Howson Dam group requests committee of council title and in a letter, the committee chair said their offer to help had been rejected outright.

In a report from director of public works, it was stated that “it is not anticipated, at this time, that the Dam Committee would have direct involvement in the next step,” a dam safety analysis.

Council carried a motion in favour of beginning the request for proposal process for a safety analysis.

Jun. 5, 2017:

As recommended by the director of public works, North Huron voted to award the safety analysis project to KGS Group Consulting Engineers, a Mississauga company, for a total estimated fee of \$79,592.

A four-phase work plan was provided. Phase 1 includes dam hazard classification and inflow design flood analysis, and Phase 2 focuses on a breach analysis.

Phase 3 and Phase 4 include preliminary stability analysis; concrete coring and foundation structural sampling; and rehabilitation scope and feasibility.

Jun. 20, 2017:

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) stated that they did not have concerns with the proposed work to the Howson Dam in regards to the species at risk, the black redhorse sucker fish and mussels, found to be living in the Maitland River.

In response the MNRF commented that, “if no significant changes to the approach to complete the work were made, there was no concern with the preliminary work submitted, and therefore no further Species at Risk permitting would be needed.”

However, Informal feedback received earlier that month from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans stated that any changes in water level that would impact mussel habitat would require additional fieldwork for detailed surveys.

The EA process was then suspended until detailed information relating to the Howson Dam could be gathered to answer questions regarding the permit requirements under the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act (LRIA).

Jan. 18, 2018:

In an update to the council, the director of public works shared that all data required for the dam safety assessment report should be collected by spring 2018.

The dam safety assessment is only one aspect of the encompassing EA.

The director of public works said the completed dam safety assessment report will include comprehensive data to assist council in the preferred course of action and at a level of detail that is consistent with the requirements of MNRF and Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act, prior to advancing with any long-term plan surrounding the Howson Dam.

Jun. 18, 2018:

Those for and against the Howson Dam refurbishment project spoke to council.

Wingham residents David Shaw, Ken Wood, Sinclair Wardop, Doyle Cullen, and Andy McBride begged council to restore the dam to its former impressive state.

An Ontario Rivers Alliance (ORA) representative spoke in favour of removal of the Howson Dam and returning the river to its natural state.

ORA is a not-for-profit grassroots organization acting as a voice for several stewardships, associations, citizens and First Nation peoples who have come together to protect, conserve and restore river ecosystems.

It was Linda Heron's, chair of ORA, opinion that the Howson Dam degrades water quality, threatens fisheries, and could jeopardize the ecosystem services that healthy rivers provide.

She added that the life-cycle costs associated with naturalizing the river ecosystem are significantly lower than to rebuild, avoids the substantial costs of the ongoing maintenance, and significantly reduces the Township's short and long-term liability.

Jul. 9, 2018:

North Huron council voted to work with Save the Howson Dam committee in developing a plan moving forward.

The director of public works recommended KGS further their safety analysis of the concrete by collecting core samples for the spillways to determine the strength. He added that the core sampling might not confirm the viability of rehabilitation of the dam but rather it may eliminate it as an acceptable course of action.

Coun. Trevor Seip (current deputy reeve) asked why council would spend money on core sampling when core sampling from 1983, by Atkinson Davis Inc., determined the dam structure was not suitable for rehabilitation.

"What has been done to the dam since 1983?" Seip asked. "If the answer is nothing, then why would we spend \$22,000 to hear the same results or worse? It sounds like we would be throwing money at something that we already know needs replacement or removal, forget the rehab."

Council passed a motion to continue discussion with the Save the Dam committee; put stop logs back into the dam to slightly raise water levels; and discontinue further analysis of the structure and core sampling.

July 23, 2018:

In a letter to North Huron council Phil Beard, Wingham resident and general manager of Maitland Valley Conservation Authority, encouraged council to consider developing a process where both of these options can be examined in a

way that looks at what is in the best interest of the Township of North Huron, its citizens and the health of the river system.

He used the removal of the Listowel dam as an example and the Municipality of North Perth was faced with a similar challenge. The process they developed was to appoint a committee comprised of four citizens who had an interest in the issue along with two councillors. The committee was charged with the task of examining the pros and cons of each option and to bring a report back to council.

Sept. 24, 2018:

North Huron council voted to defer a decision about the Howson Dam rehabilitation project onto the next council following the 2018 municipal election.

This decision came after the director of public works, Sean McGhee, recommended council establish a working group of citizens from all three wards which would, without bias, decide the future of the water course through the Town of Wingham and make recommendations for council to proceed.

He added that his report to council is based on the Howson Dam project being deemed non-area rated, meaning tax dollars would come from all three wards to pay for it. Should council decide the project is area rated in the ward of Wingham, McGhee said the composition of the working group would change dramatically.

Feb. 4, 2019:

The Howson Dam group asked the new council for committee of council status.

The group's objectives are to become an official committee of council and they would like to assist with the repair project in any way possible; improve the function and appearance of the dam; and re-establish the historic water level.

The group is currently requesting that council initiate discussions with them regarding how they can be of assistance with a repair project; make application to Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry for approval to proceed with repairs to the dam as soon as possible.

Council passed a motion directing staff bring a report back to council and further discuss working with the Howson Dam group.