

Mill Creek Park

A success story: How the Village of Dexter overcame Challenges through Collaboration

By Shawn Keough, Village President

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As you walk through the newly constructed Mill Creek Park this week, you will notice that the railing along the serpentine path still needs to be painted. There are some plantings that need to be replaced and some old survey stakes that need to be pulled out. A few brick pavers need to be recut and compacted, and one of the rain gardens drains a little slower than anticipated. These are just a few of the details that remain to complete a vision that was conceptualized nearly 10 years ago and a journey that the Village undertook despite many hurdles and challenges. This is the story of how the Village of Dexter overcame those challenges, one at a time, through collaboration with many partners, a shared vision, and hard work to create a new park and pathway network for everyone to use and enjoy. This is the story of shared success and a new western gateway for the Village of Dexter. We thought it would be fun to recap the process and share some of the highlights from the past several years.

Bridge Replacement and Dam Removal

Many Village residents will recall that the new Mill Creek Park was once an inaccessible pond area that extended from the Main Street Bridge south to the back side of the Forest Lawn Cemetery. The pond was hidden in many ways from downtown because of the vegetation along Jeffords unless you happen to be standing (at your own risk) on the deteriorating Main Street Bridge. How many of you remember the holes in the sidewalk along that old bridge that allowed you to unintentionally look down into Mill Creek? Not exactly a safe crossing into or out of our community. How many remember when it was closed on one side because the holes got big enough you could lose a shoe? The pond was manmade, having formed when the dam was constructed in the 1800s and then re-constructed by Henry Ford in 1933. The ownership of the dam in modern day was sort of a mystery, however, there was no question that the waters of Mill Creek that flowed over the dam toward the Huron River were under the control of the State of Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). The dam itself was very well built. It was structurally tied into the substructure of the old Main Street Bridge. The old Main Street Bridge was owned and maintained by the Washtenaw County Road Commission. The allowable weight limit rating had been lowered many times from 2001 through 2005 and the school district had even changed their bus routes because of the question of whether it was safe to take loaded buses across it.

After years of submitting updated evaluations of the deteriorating bridge's condition (with declining allowable weight limits) to the State's critical bridge program, the Road Commission was finally rewarded with a notice of funding in 2005. The Village quickly recognized this as an opportunity to create a new vision for the western entrance to our Village. After several discussions with the Road Commission and with support from the MDEQ, the Village and Road Commission entered into an agreement to share in the cost of the new bridge. The Village, in cooperation with our Downtown Development Authority (DDA), agreed to pay for many of the aesthetic bridge elements that you see today. The decorative street lighting, the decorative railings, the decorative stone façade and landscaping were all design elements added to the project to enhance the look and beauty of the new bridge so that it matched our streetscape elements in our downtown. Working cooperatively with the Road Commission was a key collaboration in this entire effort.

After completing the initial new bridge design in 2007, the Road Commission and Village still needed to get permission from the MDEQ to remove the dam. After months of research led to no clear decision on the ownership of the dam, the Village, the Road Commission and Ford Motor Company entered into a 3 party agreement whereby all 3 entities agreed that the dam was no longer needed, that it could be removed and that the Village would apply to the MDEQ for its removal. One of the main concerns that surrounded the dam ownership question, in addition to the question of who would be responsible for the cost of removing the dam, was who would be responsible for the sediment that had accumulated in the pond area behind the dam over the previous 80 years. Was it contaminated? How much was there? If it was contaminated, what do you do with it? And at whose cost? All of these questions were the basis of a long permitting process and review with the MDEQ. There were concerns raised by the Huron River Watershed Council and the MDEQ about how much sediment may get washed downstream into the Huron River. There were concerns raised by the MDEQ that when the pond area was drained, wetlands would emerge or still be present. How would the Village protect those wetlands? How much of the area that would surface was actually wetlands? What was the new flood plain that would result after the stream stabilized itself? Would the quality of the sediments that were found be harmful to the River or any of the communities downstream? All of these questions had to be reviewed and answered. Fortunately, our application was viewed favorably and our open approach toward working with the MDEQ to answer and address these questions resulted in the MDEQ being supportive of removing the dam and allowing Mill Creek to restore itself to its original or natural condition. But we still had to evaluate and deal with the unknown sediments.

The Village agreed to do quite a bit of sampling of the pond sediments upstream of the dam and found that for the most part, only elevated levels of naturally occurring arsenic were in the sediment. The Village and Road Commission worked cooperatively with the MDEQ to finalize a design that kept the excavated sediments from behind the dam on site instead of allowing them to flow downstream. The plan called for the excavated sediment to remain on site adjacent to the stream instead of being dried and hauled off at a more expensive cost. This idea of placing the sediments along the embankment was not as easy a detail to implement as it may have sounded. Upon further review, it was determined that the Village did not own the property or the riparian rights to the property adjacent to the pond. An exhaustive title search led to the discovery that several parcels of land needed to be acquired along the eastern edge of the pond. Fortunately again, the Village was able to acquire the land within a short time frame to keep the dam removal portion of the project viable and to meet the permit conditions for safe sediment handling and placement.

Once all the necessary permits were obtained, construction began in June 2008. Despite our best efforts to maintain two way traffic, a small portion of the bridge deck fell in and was deemed unsafe. Our town was forced to deal with one way traffic into the Village for approximately four months. This placed a tremendous strain on many of our local businesses. The rest of the bridge construction went fairly smoothly as the Road Commission staff were great to work with and all of our desired aesthetic enhancements were incorporated into the new bridge.

The new bridge was opened to traffic in September 2008. Concurrently, the DDA finished their Jeffords/Forest Street and Alley parking improvement project in the spring of 2009 and the former pond area was framed for a new park. The sediments from behind the dam were used to construct the embankment along Jeffords in the vicinity of the plaza that is now at the corner of Main Street and Jeffords. The sediments were dried, compacted and encapsulated with clean fill. With approval from the MDEQ, the sediments were placed in areas that were not considered high quality wetlands. The Village and MDEQ agreed to a Due Care Plan both during

the construction of the new bridge and for maintaining the area in the future so that the sediments were properly covered and cared for over time.

The Village's total cost toward the completion of the bridge project was approximately \$910,000, including the Village's portion of the design and construction for the dam removal and bridge aesthetics and land acquisition. It is important to note that approximately \$150,000 of this amount was paid by the Village's Downtown Development Authority.

Mill Creek Park Development

As the bridge project was nearing completion, the planning and design for the new Mill Creek Park was ramping up. A subcommittee of Village Trustees, Planning Commissioners, Parks Commissioners, DDA members and Village Staff was formed to select a consultant to help us through the process of master planning, designing, permitting and constructing the park that has taken shape over the past 15 months. The Master Planning process involved multiple community input sessions and involved stakeholders, residents and interested parties. The Master Plan outlined a vision for the park along the banks of the newly formed Mill Creek and supported the idea that one day the border to border trail would come through Dexter. The vision for a connected path from as far west/north of the Village as Hudson Mills Metropark into the Village and onto the south connecting to the school property was born. The idea of combining recreational opportunities with water quality management, environmental stewardship and educational opportunities related to storm water control and best management practices was embraced by the community leadership and supported by residential feedback.

One of the key challenges to the park development was the idea of creating a park with access to the creek while the creek channel was reforming itself after years of sediment build up. The initial channel that formed in the soft sediments after the dam was removed was deep and narrow in many places. A narrow channel creates higher velocities and encourages soil erosion and transport of sediment. The higher velocities also are not desirable for creating natural fish habitats. The Village's goals for improving the stream included stabilizing the stream and slowing the water down. In order to insure that the stream and floodplain would be stable, the Village needed to make the stream shallower and wider, which would require another permit from the MDEQ. In order to properly realign the stream as part of the park project, access was needed from both sides of the stream. After initial attempts to get an easement from the property owner on the west side of the creek failed, the Village pursued an outright purchase of the property. In June of 2010, the Village acquired approximately 7 acres along the west side of Mill Creek. Acquiring this property took months of negotiation with the property owner, but was well worth the effort and cost. The park area that the Village now owns is approximately 14 acres in size and spans both sides of Mill Creek, insuring that the wonderful views of the wetlands to the west from downtown and from within the park itself will remain natural and protected for years into the future.

The overall cost to complete the park was approximately \$1,400,000, including land acquisition, design, permitting, inspection, testing and construction. Approximately \$500,000 was funded through two grants; one through the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the second from the Waterways Grant Program.

Trails and Pathways

A key part of the overall park Master Plan was the vision that the Village of Dexter could become a regional hub and destination for non-motorized activity and connectivity. Our vision was centered on the belief that

recreational and healthy activities were desirable to our residents. We also believed that non-motorized activity was an economic engine that would be good for our business community by making it easier and fun to walk or bike to the Village. The Village partnered with the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Department to complete the Westside Connector Path. This pathway was officially opened in March 2012 and will serve as a key link on the County's Border to Border Trail. It also provides much needed connectivity for Village residents in Westridge and the Cedars of Dexter and the other neighborhoods west of the railroad tracks. The innovative design of a bridge structure over Mill Creek and under the railroad tracks provides a unique setting and entrance for non-motorized activity to our Village. A portion of the Village's non-motorized federal aid grant funding (\$458,000) was used in partnership with the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Department to complete the unique trail project. The remainder of the funds were put towards the Mill Creek Park project.

In the coming year, the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority will be constructing the last 3 miles of a non-motorized trail that will connect the Village to Hudson Mills Metropark. The Village is also working in cooperation with the County parks on a trail leading east of the Village to Dexter Huron Metropark. Both of these future pathways will be tremendous recreational opportunities for our residents. As we look to the future, the Mill Creek Park Master Plan includes a potential trail south from the new park all the way to Shield Road. This future trail would connect to the Dexter Community Schools and be another great piece of connectivity to our recreational trail network. There is much planning to be done and we still need to secure funding for this future project, but I believe that where there is a will, there is a way!

I believe that the Village of Dexter has set a good example for other communities around the State. We embraced a shared vision, we communicated the goals of that vision, we planned the work, we looked for partnerships and funding opportunities and we accomplished something that will be in our community forever. The Mill Creek Park and the trail network have been created for everyone to enjoy. So as you walk along a segment of the boardwalk, or down the serpentine path, please remember this story of success. I would like to personally thank and acknowledge all of the residents, Village staff, contractors, community members, County and State partners that shared ideas, shared encouragement and helped make this happen! We did this together! And it feels great!

