

Developer seeks help to restore section of river

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Grand Rapids developer Dan Hibma, a partner with Land & Co., is asking Ottawa County to fund a study on the feasibility of returning a 22.5-mile stretch of the Grand River into a navigable waterway for boating.

But Hibma, who appeared before the Ottawa County Planning Commission Monday, April 27, with Cameron Brown, a former Michigan senator and current consultant, declined to say what his interest is in restoring the river.

"This is the most underutilized natural resource in the state of Michigan," Brown told the planning commission.

Brown said his firm conducted a study on the stretch of the Grand from the Fulton Street bridge in Grand Rapids to the Bass River in Allendale Township.

The study, he said, concludes that if the waterway were to be restored and marinas along the river fully built out, more than 61 new jobs could be created, and an annual impact of \$4.2 million would be added to the local economy.

The two said they would like to see the river returned to where it was more than 40 years ago, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintained the Grand River

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as a navigable waterway from Grand Rapids to Grand Haven. The Army Corps of Engineers stopped maintaining that portion of the river, declaring it no longer was a commercial waterway.

A 1978 study on the stretch of the river by the Army Corps indicated the river was not fit for most boats. "Currently, boating is made dangerous by numerous obstructive hazards in the Grand River including pilings, wing walls and extensive shoaling in the river."

The 1978 study concluded it would be expensive to remove the obstacles and dredge the river to make it safe for use. In today's dol-

lars, the project could cost up to \$37 million to complete — or an estimated \$9 million if only the obstructions were removed and minimal dredging, Brown's study found.

Brown is asking the County Planning Commission to use a state grant to at least study the possibilities. In 2011, the state legislature allocated up to \$100,000 for any local government to study the lower Grand River and produce a topographical map of the river and locate underwater obstacles. To date, the money remains unused as no governmental agency has been willing to oversee the study.

Brown told the planning commission the map would at least give the county an understanding of what type of restoration might

be possible.

During its meeting on Monday, April 27, planning commissioners appeared lukewarm to the idea.

"What would be the final purpose of the study?" asked Planning Commissioner Rowan Wilson, who is an environmental scientist. "Getting dredging money for the commercial harbors in Michigan is hard enough. Getting money to dredge the river would be more difficult."

Chairman Greg DeJong saw some benefit from the proposed study.

"I have been on the stretch from Grand Valley State University to the Bass River and it is a beautiful stretch of river," he said. "I would like to see the pilings pulled out."

Commissioners are

expected to review the study proposal for the next few weeks and decide if they want the county to take on the grant, which would produce a topographical map and obstruction locations.

"We'll look at the scope and the pros and cons of doing the study and bring back our staff recommendations perhaps as early as June," Mark Knudsen, Ottawa County director of planning and performance said.

Since the 1970s, the Army Corps has only maintained the stretch from the Bass River to Grand Haven because that stretch is commercially viable.

"This project would dovetail with the work being done to restore the river through Grand Rapids," Brown said.