



Negative Impacts of Dredging 22.5 Miles of the Grand River

A Critique of the *Grand River Waterway Project*

What is being proposed?

The Grand River Waterway project plans to dredge a 22.5-mile channel between the Fulton Street bridge in Grand Rapids and the Bass River State Recreation Area (near Eastmanville in Ottawa County). The channel would be 50 feet wide by 7 feet deep and designed to allow large power boats from 26 to 49 feet long.

Who is behind the Grand River Waterway project?

The Grand River Waterway is a pet project created by commercial real estate developer, Dan Hibma, who is promoting the building of a marina in order to profit from development of nearly 200 acres of riverfront property his companies own near Grandville. The Grand River Waterway Annual Report filed with the State for 2018 lists Daniel Hibma as the President, Treasurer, Secretary, and one of the Directors. The other two Directors listed are his business partner and attorney.

How did they get \$3.15 million in taxpayer funding?

The real-estate developers behind the project influenced politicians in the Michigan State Legislature to get appropriations passed totaling \$3,150,000. The latest appropriation was quietly passed during the December 2018 lame duck session.

Why is the Michigan DNR managing the project if it violates their own Wildlife Action Plan?

The Michigan DNR's 2015-2025 Wildlife Action Plan identifies dredging and channelization of rivers as one of the top threats to wildlife because it typically results in decreased habitat diversity, loss of natural aquatic vegetation and floodplain habitats, bank instability and erosion, and increased sediment transport. The Michigan DNR has no choice but to be involved because it has been directed to do so by the Michigan Legislature.

How is dredging and channelization devastating to the environment?

Channelization of the river is known to lower water quality, increase water velocity, carry sediment further downstream, and it would likely expand the large brown plume of sediment that already extends into Lake Michigan at Grand Haven.

Dredging would destroy important river-bottom habitats essential to protected fish and shellfish species. Increased riverbank erosion could threaten protected plant species.

Disturbing the riverbed and riverbanks has the potential to unlock trapped contaminants that may have accumulated from decades of industrial activity, sewage discharge, and the abandoned Fenske landfill site which borders the river.

During dry periods, channelization can further lower water levels and cause ecological harm along the shoreline, as well as in adjacent bayous and wetland areas.

What about potential impacts to threatened and endangered species?

Nearly 50 species of concern associated with the river corridor have been documented to occur in Ottawa County. The Grand River, its tributaries, and its banks are home to many species of State-protected plants, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and shellfish species. Disruption of the river substrate, flow channels, spawning grounds, banks, and connected wetlands poses a significant threat to their habitats.

What are the ongoing impacts and costs of repeated dredging?

Maintenance dredging would need to happen on a regular basis and would continue to disrupt and destroy riverbottom habitats for years and decades to come. The cost to taxpayers for ongoing dredging and maintenance of the channel has been estimated by Grand River Waterway to be \$160,000 annually, an estimate that is almost certainly low.



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How would the project impact local law enforcement and emergency rescue services?

Routine patrolling, law enforcement, and emergency rescue services would rely primarily on local law enforcement such as the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department. It would be a burden on their already limited budget and resources.

Who would be responsible for no-wake zones?

Local communities would be responsible to pass no-wake zone ordinances, and purchase and maintain signage.

Who would handle channel buoys and signs?

The Grand River Waterway group estimates the need for 450 buoys, channel signage, and seasonal installation, removal, and storage. The Grand River from Bass River Recreation Area to Grand Rapids is a navigable waterway, but is not a Federally recognized channel. As such, the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard does not have the authority or funding to maintain the channel. This burden would fall on State and local government.

How could public and private boat launches and docks be affected?

During low-water periods, channelization of the river could impede access to boat launches and docks, creating the need for further dredging or modification of these facilities at the expense of property owners and local government.

How could Ottawa County Parks programs and property be harmed?

The Ottawa County Parks' mission includes "protecting critical watersheds, maintaining native wildlife and plant species, and providing high-quality recreational activities." It has established the Grand River Heritage Water Trail and has made significant investments in its Grand River Greenway initiative that now includes 2400 acres and 13 miles of Grand River shoreline. Environmental harm from ongoing dredging, and the noise, wakes, and erosion caused by large boat traffic would impede the quiet enjoyment of shoreline parks and pathways, peaceful paddling, fishing, birdwatching, and other low-impact activities.

How would riverfront homeowners be impacted?

Increased erosion from channelization and boat wakes could cause loss of property and the need for expensive shore stabilization investments. Noise pollution from large boats and onboard partying would impact homeowners' rights to quiet enjoyment of their property. During low-water periods, channelization could make private docks and boat ramps unusable.

Wouldn't increased spending in the local economy offset the costs?

No. The cost to our natural environment and wildlife would be immeasurable.

Additionally, the economic study performed on behalf of the Grand River Waterway group was self-serving, based on suspect premises, and failed to consider a number of factors. For example, calculating the potential economic benefits of this project to inland and rural communities should not be based on data from Lake Michigan harbor and resort communities such as Grand Haven.

Any theoretical increase in tax revenue and spending at local businesses would largely benefit Grand Rapids and Grand Haven, while local governments between the two points would bear much of the burden for law enforcement and rescue, creating no-wake zones, shore stabilization, ensuring access to boat ramps, and other unforeseen costs.

The study based its assumptions on anticipated visits by tens of thousands of small watercraft that are already able to safely navigate the Grand River without the need for dredging. Even the Grand Lady Riverboat, at 26 feet wide by 105 feet long, regularly navigates the Grand River, and its owners are opposed to this dredging project.



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Wouldn't increased property values expand tax revenue?

Not likely. A majority of the shoreline property is owned by Ottawa and Kent Counties, Grand Valley State University, the State of Michigan, the Cities of Grand Rapids, Grandville, and Wyoming, and other public entities. Any theoretical increase in the value of those properties would not generate tax revenue.

Dredging would almost certainly make the water murkier for years or decades to come, and declines in water clarity are linked to declines in property value. Dirtier water, eroding shorelines, exposed mudflats, noisy boaters, and damage to private docks could easily result in property value declines.

How could historic and Native American sites be impacted?

There are many documented historic and Native American sites on the riverbank and within the river channel that could be negatively impacted by dredging and expanded shore erosion. The Grand River Heritage Water Trail includes many of these sites.

What section of river is best suited for large, powered watercraft?

The Army Corps of Engineers maintains a channel between Grand Haven and the Bass River Recreation Area that is suited for traffic by large watercraft. It is important to preserve the portion of river upstream from Bass River for paddlers, anglers, fishing boats, and other low-impact watercraft and activities.

Have public hearings been held or planned?

No. To date we are unaware of any public hearings that have been held or planned by State or Federal agencies. This project has moved forward with very little input from local governments, property owners, and the public.

What about the rights of public and private property owners?

Since the State of Michigan has taken over project management from the private Grand River Waterway group, and the Michigan Attorney General has ruled that a State of Michigan dredging project doesn't require landowner permission, owners of shoreline and bottomland property have lost legal rights to prevent the project.

Is this the same as the Grand Rapids Whitewater Project or an extension of it?

No. Grand Rapids Whitewater is working to restore the historic rapids in downtown Grand Rapids. Its vision includes quiet use of the river by paddlers and anglers, and the project ends at the Fulton Street Bridge.

Would the project affect the GVSU Rowing Team?

Yes. The Grand Valley State University Rowing Team uses approximately two miles of the river in the project area for practice. Initial dredging, ongoing maintenance dredging, and increased boat traffic and wakes would be disruptive to their program.

Hasn't dredging already been attempted and failed?

Yes. An attempt was made to dredge a 45-foot-wide by 4.5-foot-deep channel in the late 1800s. The project was abandoned partway through after the futility of holding back the shifting sand and silt was realized. In the early 1900s, miles of wooden walls were installed within the river to attempt to keep a channel open. Those walls are largely still present and didn't produce the long-term effect intended. In 1930, Congress passed the Rivers and Harbors Act which abandoned a Federally recognized channel in this section of the river. In 1978, the Army Corps of Engineers decided not to pursue another proposal to dredge this length of the Grand River because of the potentially devastating environmental impact and immense long-term costs to create and maintain a channel.



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What can you do to stop this project?

While there are permits and testing required before dredging can occur, there is no guarantee that will prevent it. Funding is already in place, testing is moving forward, and backers hope to have dredging completed by 2020.

Contact your local, State, and Federal lawmakers to let them know your concerns and objections to the Grand River Waterway dredging project.

Friends of the Lower Grand River is a grassroots coalition of concerned citizens, paddling enthusiasts, anglers, property owners, government officials, parks supporters, university professors, environmental protection organizations, business owners, and taxpayers.

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