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POND **VS.** RIVER

When torrential rain collapsed a Smithtown dam, Stump Pond emptied into LI Sound

THE DEBATE NOW: Recreate the pond, or let the Nissequogue run wild

A2-3 | [UPDATES AT NEWSDAY.COM](#)

The Nissequogue River flows through Blydenburgh Park where Stump Pond used to be.

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NOVEMBER '24



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1 STUMP POND. Left, a rainstorm in August wiped out a dam at Blydenburgh County Park and drained Stump Pond in Smithtown, exposing its muddy bottom. Months later, right, the now-freed Nissequogue River has grown to as wide as 8 feet, and vegetation has begun to sprout. Some conservationists advocate leaving the area undammed to allow wildlife to return.

MAY '25



AFTER THE STORM, REBUILD DAM OR LET RIVER RUN?

Nostalgia for once-full pond in Smithtown competes with conservationists' wish to return area to nature

BY TRACY TULLIS
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On the broad, flat floodplain where Blydenburgh Park's Stump Pond used to be, wild grasses have sprouted from the long-submerged seedbed and clusters of forget-me-nots, irises and buttercups have sprung from the muddy bottom.

From a wooden pier that served as a boat launch before the pond drained last summer, birdsong seemed to come from all directions on a sunny May morning: red-winged blackbird, Carolina wren, spotted sandpiper, red-eyed vireo, catbird, Northern mockingbird, great crested flycatcher and a chimney swift were all calling, according to Merlin, a birding app.

And a little farther in the distance, a swift-moving stream was finding its meandering

path through the altered landscape.

"The river is behaving naturally now," said Andrew Fisk, Northeast regional director at the nonprofit American Rivers, "setting out a channel as it heads to Long Island Sound."

The dam in Blydenburgh County Park in Smithtown collapsed in August after a torrential downpour dropped more than 10 inches of rain. Millions of gallons of water rushed past the broken dam and into Long Island Sound.

Visitors to the park after the storm were shocked by the sight: the barren pond floor studded with the stumps of trees felled 200 years ago before the area was flooded. Nine months later, parts of the floodplain, especially near the dam where the sediment is thickest, are still mostly bare, with just a few grasses emerging as the silt dries out and the

weather warms.

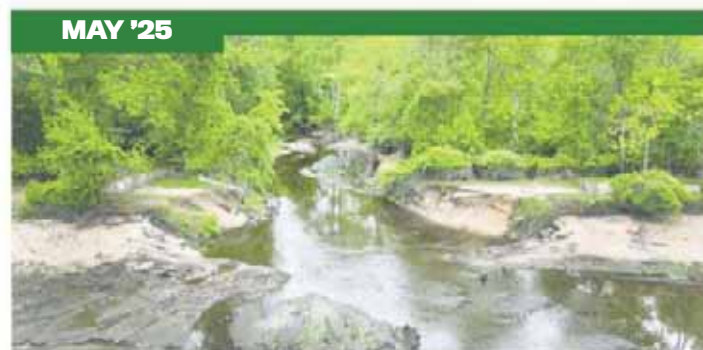
The collapse touched off a debate that speaks to the question of how to manage Long Island's natural places: should the pond be recreated for human use and enjoyment, or should the Nissequogue River be allowed to run wild?

Suffolk County officials, fishermen and many who have enjoyed the pond over the years are keen to have the dam rebuilt and the pond returned, largely as it existed for two centuries.

Un-damming U.S. rivers

Stump Pond — also known as Blydenburgh Lake and New Mill Pond — was "a great recreational facility," County Executive Edward P. Romaine said in an interview. "If we don't rebuild, it could go into a marshland and meadowland. . . . A pond will get more use."

But ecologists, trout fishing



NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

2 BREACHED DAM. The structure, which also served as a walkway, remains destroyed after the storm. The dam had blocked the natural path of the Nissequogue River, which flows north into Smithtown Bay and Long Island Sound.

enthusiasts, birders and others are hoping the Nissequogue will be allowed to remain in its natural state, flowing freely through this nearly mile-long stretch of its course, as it did for thousands of years before the dam was built.

"A river wants to be a river,"

Fisk said in an interview. "And removing a dam is the quickest, most effective way to make a river healthy."

Across the country, more than half a million dams block America's rivers and streams,

See POND on A16



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3 BOAT DOCKS. Left, two wooden piers (one shown here) had not only served boats and kayaks, but offered a perfect place to fish and enjoy the view. Right, the drained pond is a starkly different scene months later. Vegetation is beginning to grow where the pond once was.

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NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

REBUILD DAM OR LET THE RIVER FLOW?

POND from A2

most of them small dams that once powered grist, textile or sawmills in the early years of the industrial revolution. Most were abandoned as new technologies made them obsolete. Many fell into disrepair; others, like the Blydenburgh dam, originally built in 1798 for a grist mill, were reconstructed to contain ponds used for boating and fishing.

Over the years, scientists have documented how these hundreds of thousands of dams have damaged the country's rivers and estuaries — preventing migrating fish from reaching their spawning grounds and sending populations into decline, starving coastal wetlands of nutrients and sediment, and thinning native species that can't thrive in warm, still water while allowing a less diverse array of invasive species to take their places.

In the past 25 years, a movement to remove dams has spread from coast to coast, but has bypassed Long Island. Since 1999, more than 2,000 have been dismantled across the country, Fisk told Newsday; last year alone, according to American Rivers' inventory, 108 barriers in 24 states were taken down, rejoining 2,528 miles of disconnected river habitat. The group is hoping to step up the pace, with a goal of working with local partners to remove a thousand dams a year — a total of 30,000 by 2050.

All but a very few of Long Island's approximately 140 rivers and streams have been dammed, often with multiple barriers, fragmenting the waterways and degrading habitat. According to a state inventory, 96 dams remain in Nassau and Suffolk counties, but Enrico Nardone, director of the Islip-

based Seatuck Environmental Association, says this is a significant undercount.

In the past 20 years, six Long Island dams have collapsed and have not been rebuilt, including Blydenburgh and Stony Brook, which failed in the same August storm. (Stony Brook's mill pond was in a more populated area and has not been the subject of the same campaign.) But according to Nardone, "there has never been an intentional dam removal" on Long Island.

He and a growing coalition of conservationists are suggesting the Nissequogue could join this slowly expanding network of free-flowing rivers. Seatuck and Save the Sound are leading the campaign, joined by local, regional and national organizations including Defend H2O in Sag Harbor, Trout Unlimited, American Rivers, The Long Island Conservancy, Open Space Institute, Native Fish Coalition and Four Harbors Audubon Society.

The Nissequogue "really represents kind of a North Star of river restoration on Long Island," said Jake Dittes, Save the Sound's director of Connecticut ecological restoration programs.

'We are rebuilding this dam'

Ever since Stump Pond emptied, county officials have been calling for a new dam and new pond. When the dam failed, Romaine told Newsday last month, a lot of habitat was lost for lake fish and ducks. Without a dam, the landscape "will be something like a mud pit — not something that someone can enjoy," he said. "We are rebuilding this dam," he insisted.

The Suffolk County Legislature appropriated \$6.6 million for the project in December, though the county's chief engineer, Alex Prego, acknowl-



POND NAMESAKE. Hundreds of trees were chopped down before the dam was built, giving Stump Pond its name. Those stumps are now exposed on what was once the pond's bottom.



UNRUFFLED. Geese make themselves at home in the new vegetation that has been growing beside the Nissequogue River.

edged at a recent public meeting in Smithtown the actual cost could be higher.

The first \$600,000 is funding a study of the river's 40-square-mile watershed, which will consider historical weather data to inform the design of a new dam, Prego said.

Romaine said in a press statement last month he had asked the public works department to "move as quickly as possible" to "begin the process of bringing [the] pond back to the community."

Many in the community are eager for that to happen. Jim Jonke, president of Long Island Bassmasters and the founder of the Stump Pond Restoration Coalition, said the pond has been a popular spot for fishing for largemouth bass, perch and

sunfish, but the space is now a dangerous mudflat, infested with mosquitoes. With the dam gone, he said, "the property is unusable. There's nothing to do there."

David Reisfield, president of the Long Island Greenbelt Trail Conference, said hikers enjoyed the expansive views across the water from the trail that circled Stump Pond and lamented that as the vegetation fills in, they won't be able to see the more distant water. "It'll be a lot less nice to look at," he said.

Things come back quickly

Conservationists argue that even without a pond, there will still be plenty to do. The millions of dollars it would cost to build and maintain a

dam and its impoundment could be used to renovate the neglected Blydenburgh mill, build boardwalks and viewing platforms into the wetland and along the water, and bridges that could provide views up and down the river.

They say there's no doubt that a free-flowing Nissequogue is far better for the ecology of the river and its estuary. The lessons of previous dam collapses and removals is that nature knows how to restore itself. Just a few months after a dam collapsed at West Brook in Islip, the muddy stream banks were adorned in a riot of wildflowers, cattails and shrubs.

When dams come down, "you see things come back very, very quickly," Fisk said. Within a season or two, the former contours of Stump Pond will be cloaked by a lush riparian meadow, he predicted.

If the Nissequogue is undammed, migrating fish such as American eel and alewives, a type of river herring, will surge upstream in search of mates and a suitable place to lay their eggs. Populations of these fish, which spend part of their lives in freshwater and part in the ocean, are falling precipitously across Long Island, "primarily because their spawning habitat has been so greatly diminished with all the dams and culverts," said Dittes, of Save the Sound.

Brook trout — the only trout native to Long Island — might also repopulate the Nissequogue. The river would once have supported these fish, which need cold, fast-running streams, said Rick Vickers, pres-

RENDERING



SAVE THE SOUND

FUTURE VISION. By summer's end, a meadow will start to grow from floodplain, providing a rich habitat, a nonprofit predicts.

ident of Long Island Trout Unlimited. But "trout were no longer in the pond because they can't survive at those temperatures."

"It's really in the service of the health of the entire environment to have a free-running stream," Vickers said.

Though Prego said the county would build a fish ladder alongside a new dam to assist migrating fish, experts say recent studies have found an artificial ladder is a poor substitute for a river without barriers. John Turner, a conservation advocate at Seatuck, said up to 70% of fish will manage to navigate some fish passages; at others, a mere 5% to 15% will find their way.

"You're always taking a chance with a fish ladder that it's not going to work well," said John Waldman, an aquatic biologist at Queens College who studies fish migration.

It's not just the river-dwelling species that will benefit, conservationists argue. For centuries, the nutrients and sediments that should naturally flow downstream and into the Sound have been halted by the dam, sinking to the pond floor. Now that those sediments are flowing again, they will enrich the coastal wetlands, which need sediment deposits more than ever to keep up with rising seas.

There's also a public safety argument for taking out the Blydenburgh dam: A natural floodplain typically reduces flooding upstream and down, according to FEMA, by spreading out and storing stormwater. When a torrential downpour falls on an already-filled pond, it has no place to go — and that can lead to dam failure.

If the Blydenburgh dam is not rebuilt, there will still be two more dams on two different branches of the Nissequogue, at Millers and Phillips ponds. Ecologists have been talking for several years about removing the Phillips dam in particular, Nardone said, which would open up the last three-plus-mile stretch of the river as it winds north to Smithtown Bay. "I'm optimistic that we're going to be able to take that dam out one of these days," he said.

Not standing still

Prego, the engineer, said at the public meeting the county hopes to begin construction on a dam next year.

But the project will have to be reviewed by the Suffolk County Council on Environmental Quality, which advises the legislature on whether a full environmental impact study should be done. The county will also have to apply for permits from the state Department of Environmental Conservation and from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees construction in and around federally protected wetlands and waterways.

It's rarely a speedy process.

In the meantime, native species are already finding their way to the river. Just recently, Nardone said he saw a solitary sandpiper foraging by the water — "a bird you would never see at the pond." By the time any construction on a dam could begin, the former pond basin will have become a flourishing wetland meadow, Nardone said. As the debate continues, the Nissequogue continues to flow, carving out its new-found path to the Sound.

Proposal would ban metal grill brushes

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Safety concerns over wire bristles prompt legislation

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY
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ALBANY — Two years ago, a 4-year-old boy in Florida was eating a hamburger hot off the grill when he was jabbed by a sharp pain in his ear that confounded doctors for 10 days.

The surprising source of the pain in cases like that nationwide have helped lead to a proposed ban in New York State on metal wire brushes widely used to clean grills because loosened bristles can break into food, creating injuries that sometimes require surgery.

The legislative proposal would ban "the manufacture, sale and use of wire bristle grill brushes . . . to help people further enjoy the grilling experience without the risk of wire brush injury."

One of the earliest warnings about the danger came in a viral TikTok following the frustration of emergency room physicians and nurses as they tried for days to find the cause of boy's excruciating pain in Florida back in 2023.

Dr. Meghan Martin, a pediatric emergency medicine physician at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Pe-

tersburg, Florida, and her colleagues examined 400 slides from a CT scan and found what lower-intensity imaging did not: A hidden metal sliver less than an inch long lodged in the boy's throat. By that time, the bristle was inflaming an abscess and spiking a fever.

"It was like, 'Oh, my gosh, we have the reason!'" recalled Martin in an interview with Newsday.

The experience prompted her to post a warning on TikTok that has drawn more than 43 million views. Other cases found the wire bristles have obstructed and perforated bowels and required surgery.

"None of the earlier imaging showed it, so we did a CT scan," Martin told Newsday. "The last frame showed it as one tiny white dot."

While her TikTok warning spawned more social media videos and medical groups are warning doctors and patients of the danger, it appears New York's bill, if approved, would be the first law to address the concern.

"I would absolutely love that," Martin said.

The measure was introduced in the State Senate by Sen. Leroy Comrie (D-St. Albans) on May 15, matching the Assembly bill that was introduced by Assemb. Chantel Jackson (D-Bronx) in February. Comrie and Jackson didn't return calls left with their offices seeking comment.

The legislative session is

scheduled to end June 17.

The bill notes the issue is a serious concern for health groups, including the American Medical Association.

The AMA said in 2018 that ingestion of the metal bristles are the cause of 130 emergency room visits a year, although researchers say the number of incidents is likely far higher because people also go to their family doctors or the pain goes unaddressed.

The AMA called for the federal government to issue a warning labels.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2012 warned that some cases required emergency surgery and advised physicians of the "critical" need to be aware of the danger.

Requests for comment to two large retailers of the brushes weren't returned.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has issued a warning on its website: "Clean your grill with a ball of aluminum foil or nylon brushes, instead of wire grill brushes, to prevent stray wire brush strands from ending up in the food."

The AMA also recommends people wipe their grill and inspect it for wire bristles before cooking.

Martin said her warning continues to draw frequent hits. "I've seen a lot of social media attention in the summer time and I think there is an awareness that is growing," she said.

Honoring fallen soldiers

Navy veteran Kevin Taylor, 70, who served 1978-2005, places flags at Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale on Saturday.



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN