

EDITORIAL

To dam or not to dam in Suffolk

County officials must decide whether to let the Nissequogue River run free

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On Long Island, we appreciate our history. We often evoke it and strive to preserve it. And we frequently use it to justify what we do today.

But which version of our history do we recall? How far back does our history extend?

That tension plays a big role in the dispute over whether to replace a dam in Blydenburgh County Park in Smithtown that was washed away by a severe rainstorm in August that dumped 10 inches of water on parts of Long Island. The collapse emptied out Stump Pond, a popular recreational spot, exposing on the pond's muddy floor a forest of stumps from trees cleared more than 200 years ago to prepare for the dam.

Those who want to rebuild the dam appeal to its history. It was built in 1798 to power a grist mill, a two-plus-century status that gives it some historical resonance. Dam supporters also recall the pond's more recent history as an oasis for hikers, fishers, boaters, and nature lovers, and they want to restore the park to what it "always" was.

But there is another frame of our history, a longer looking glass that goes back hundreds of years to when the area was populated by native people and the Nissequogue River ran wild and free through an environment that was nature-made. That is the "always" state to which we should return, say opponents of a new dam.

So, which history should we reference in deciding the Nissequogue's future?

Suffolk County officials who must make the decision have a lot to consider and should take their time. County Executive Edward Romaine has already indicated a preference. "We are rebuilding this dam," he told Newsday.

SWIM AGAINST THE CURRENT

Doing so would be swimming against a modern current. As a nation, we have become more aware of the damage dams do to natural environments and the trend has been to remove them, or not replace them when they fail. Last year, 108 dams were removed in 24 states. By some counts, more than



A rainstorm in August wiped out a dam at Blydenburgh County Park and drained Stump Pond in Smithtown, exposing its muddy bottom. Months later, the stream widened and vegetation began to sprout. Some conservationists want to leave the area undammed to allow wildlife and native plants to return. Inset: Eels on a crest of the Setalcott Nation.

2,000 of the nation's more than half-million dams have been taken down in the last 25 years.

Supporters of the dam have potent arguments. Stump Pond was a magnet for people in the area. It was stocked with bass, perch and sunfish. A hiking trail with wonderful views of the pond ringed its perimeter. It was popular with boaters. It was a calming refuge. Without the pond, they say, the area will be a mud pit.

The anti-dam argument also is strong. Let the dam go and the area will serve as a flood plain, absorbing the spillover of heavy rains that are increasingly a problem in the region. Chances are the Atlantic white cedar will reestablish itself and the forest will regrow around the river. No dam would mean the Nissequogue would return to doing what rivers do — carry sediment and nutrients downstream to Long Island Sound where they would enrich and strengthen the wetlands that are ever more vital as our natural defense against rising seas.

It also would allow for the return to

the river of native fish like brook trout. And it would let flourish species like alewives and herring and eels, which split time between the ocean and freshwater, spawning in one and living in the other. These fish also are prey for osprey and eagles, which have been making a stirring comeback along the North Shore. Eels, in particular, have special historical significance. They were sacred to the Setalcott Nation that lived in the region long before Europeans arrived. Eels are in the Setalcott Nation's crest.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

As the county weighs its decision, it's important to note that the Blydenburgh Park pastimes cited by one side or another can be enjoyed in either scenario. There will be hiking, there will be fishing, there will be boating, there will be birding, there will be sounds of nature and wisps of the wind and clean air to breathe and peace to enjoy. Neither side has a monopoly on any of that, nor will either side be shut out.

Trout fishers have just as much a claim to the state of this water as do bass fishers.

Suffolk has engaged an engineering firm to analyze all options. That's good. The county should not preclude abandoning the dam.

Approving a new one — some estimates reach \$10 million for a larger dam to meet a higher hazard level — will require reviews from county, state and federal agencies. Those evaluations will take time. County officials should keep an open mind as both processes — governmental and natural — unfold.

The one certainty here is that as Suffolk ponders, the landscape in Blydenburgh Park will change. The Nissequogue River will begin to return to its natural state. Native plant species will flourish. Trees and fish will return. Some users will embrace the changes. Others will continue to yearn for what's gone.

The new history of the Nissequogue already is being written. Who should be the author of this chapter — nature or us?