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Transmittal of Huron River and Impoundment Management Plan Recommendations and Environmental Commission Resolution

The Huron River and Impoundment Management Plan Committee is pleased to provide the following draft plan, report, and recommendations to City Council for their review and approval. The Environmental Commission recently adopted a resolution supporting the plan's 30 consensus recommendations and the recommendation to remove Argo Dam (see attached). A separate resolution from Park Advisory Commission was adopted recommending preserving the Argo Impoundment. That resolution is being transmitted to Council separately. New information on several cost assumptions are included in the revised spreadsheet in the report.

The committee has met for the past two years to better understand the sometimes-complex interrelationships among the Huron river ecology, community recreation preferences, the effect of dams on river processes, and the economic implications of different recommendations.

The Committee heard presentations from key user groups (e.g., anglers, paddlers and rowers, among others) and regulatory agencies (e.g., MDEQ Dam Safety, MDNR Fisheries). The committee included representatives from key user groups and community organizations including river residents, rowers, paddlers, anglers, the University of Michigan, Detroit Edison, the Environmental Commission, Park Advisory Commission, Planning Commission, and the Huron River Watershed Council. The Committee worked in three subcommittees - Aquatic Vegetation, Dam Management, and Recreation - to develop working drafts of reports and recommendations. City staff from Parks, Systems Planning, and Natural Area Preservation acted as valuable resources to the committee throughout the process. Water Plant staff played a key role in providing the Committee with a better understanding of dam management and the various costs associated with hydropower and recreation dams.

The Committee held three well-attended public meetings to present draft recommendations and hear

from the public about ways to refine the information and options. Virtually all information has been available on the city web site. From the beginning this process has been well supported by facilitators Professors Steve Yaffee and Julia Wondolleck from the University of Michigan.

The planning process carried out by the committee was managed to see if a consensus could be achieved on a vision, set of objectives and list of recommendations. An extensive period of joint learning built a shared understanding of the problems, opportunities and potential strategies for effective river management. Options were explored through extensive committee discussions and by requesting input from user groups and outside experts. At several points, committee members were asked to outline their preferences and rankings among options to give the committee input on which options to work on and improve. As a consensus-building process, the committee did not conduct votes, but rather sought to build the support of all committee members for the directions outlined in the report. The Committee crafted recommendations that all committee members could support, preferably with enthusiasm. In places where committee members differed on their advice to the city, the committee worked hard to make the options as clear as possible and outlined the benefits and impacts of each to inform the Commission and Council.

The following report outlines a consensus vision statement, set of objectives and detailed analyses, along with 32 recommendations, 30 of which the committee is in full support. These include recommendations on strategies for:

Providing aquatic vegetation monitoring and harvesting

Improving water quality

Providing riparian buffers

Providing for limited and appropriate development of restaurants and other public facilities

Improving recreational facilities along the river

Improving the quality of recreation, including angling, swimming and boating

Expanding capacity for ongoing river stewardship through citizen engagement, City staffing and innovative funding arrangements

Apportioning costs to more appropriate funds

The committee is also providing two options as to recommendations to the Commission on the future of the Argo Dam area. While there is not unanimous agreement among committee members as to which of the two options is preferred, the recommendations contained in the report have been analyzed and developed as fully as possible, and are supported by the committee as two viable alternatives. Both recommendations are being forwarded to the Commission and Council as the committee's best advice. Uncertainty about several aspects of these decisions remains, and the committee articulates several strategies for moving forward contingent on resolution of some of these uncertainties.

Preserving Argo Impoundment: The committee recognizes that there are clear recreational benefits to preserving the Argo Impoundment. This stretch of the river is the preferred rowing venue by the two high schools, the Ann Arbor Rowing Club, and the UM Men's club team. There are other users including some anglers, canoers, and walkers who prefer the flat water provided by the impoundment. The committee recognizes that preserving the impoundment requires continued dam maintenance and managing the aquatic vegetation. The committee also recognizes that there are other nearby areas of the Huron River that may be developable into alternate rowing sites if the decision is to remove the dam. In general, the Committee believes that these challenges are not insurmountable given enough time and clear direction from City Council.

Removing Argo Dam: The Committee recognizes that there are clear benefits to removing the dam including eliminating the inherent liabilities associated with dams and detrimental effects on aquatic habitat including the warming effect of the impoundment and decreased dissolved oxygen. Removing the dam increases the length of free flowing river through the city. There are users including some anglers, canoers, and walkers who prefer the free flowing water provided by an unimpounded river. The Committee also recognizes that removing the dam is dependent on more detailed sediment sampling and requires a one-time investment of funds for dam removal and land reclamation. The Committee is recommending that creation of new rowing venue(s) must precede dam removal to maintain rowing continuity. Each of the possible rowing sites at Barton and Geddes impoundments has significant challenges. In general, the Committee believes that these challenges are not insurmountable given enough time and clear direction from City Council.

The committee has examined best available cost information and over a 20-year period finds that the likely overall costs of removing the dam and preserving the impoundment are similar. The Committee finds that the reintroduction of hydropower at Argo dam is not economical at this time with current economic conditions and no viable sources of outside funding.

The option to develop a whitewater recreational amenity is available with either option and should be pursued. Whitewater in the dam removed option could be either a more natural set of rapids along the steeper river gradient created by removing the dam - or engineering a channelized course along some of the reclaimed parkland. Whitewater in the preserved impoundment option could be an engineered whitewater course below the dam. The Committee does not believe that the whitewater option should drive the decision at the Argo area. The decision at the Argo area comes down to one of community preference. Both options will require significant investment of capital and operation and maintenance dollars in addition to staff time. As a community, the city regularly makes decisions to create opportunities or conveniences for residents that come with inherent risks and expenses. These include bridges, swimming pools, golf courses, and dams. For the most part, if well planned for and sustainably funded, these are opportunities with risks that can be managed. The committee also believes that there is an opportunity to apportion recreation dam maintenance costs to more appropriate funds.

One option creates a dense urban recreation area by removing the existing canoe portage on the millrace and preserving the preferred rowing venue. This recommendation commits the city to maintaining the dam for the sole purpose of recreation - as is true at Geddes Dam.

The other option returns one portion of the Huron River to a more free-flowing state. This recommendation creates an estimated 28 acres of new parkland, creates a cool water fishery, provides a much longer stretch of free-flowing river as habitat and recreational space, and eliminates ongoing dam maintenance costs and future liability. This recommendation also requires development of two alternate rowing venues - each with its own challenges.

The Committee is excited about the possibilities for managing the river and impoundments more effectively as Ann Arbor's most important natural feature. The committee is impressed by the amount of interest by the citizens of Ann Arbor in the river and the planning process, and look forward to the Commission's and Council's decisions and future implementation of a number of these strategies.

Prepared by: Matthew Naud, Environmental Coordinator

Approved by: Sue McCormick, Public Services Area Administrator