

The Gadsden Times

LOCAL

Deadly Big Wills Creek low-head dam to be removed

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A deadly low-head dam on Big Wills Creek will soon be a thing of the past following action by the Gadsden City Council at Tuesday's meeting.

The city approved \$51,980 for S&ME, Inc., to design and procure permitting required to remove the low-head dam.

"As everyone in the room probably knows, we've had a couple of incidents down there," said council member Johnny Cannon. "We're just trying to take care of a problem that's there that we inherited."

Four deaths have occurred at the dam by the old pump station off Brooke Avenue in the last two years.

In early June, a woman and the man who jumped in to save her drowned.

In April 2015, a kayaker drowned and first responders had difficulty navigating the waterway.

Vicky Ryan, a member of the Etowah County Rescue Squad, drowned after the boat she was in overturned.

Low-head dams are particularly dangerous because when water flows over the top of the dam, it creates currents that pull people and boats under and holds them down.

City Engineer Heath Williamson said it would be about six months before the project is ready to be bid.

Williamson said a hydraulic study will have to be conducted, and approval will have to be obtained from a number of different state environmental regulatory agencies.

In July 2016, plans for a whitewater park at the site were floated by the nonprofit group Gadsden/Etowah Adventures.

Local attorney Jacob Millican was leading the project, and plans included a whitewater feature, a 5K track, a mud track, a mountain bike track, climbing walls, an outfitters store, a restaurant and camps for special needs and autistic children throughout the year.

The group was looking to raise \$5.5 million for the park.

The Gadsden/Etowah Adventures Facebook page hasn't been updated recently, but Cannon said he hopes to hear more about the project now that the city is taking action.