



Op-ed column:

Dock for Stockade needs full-blown environmental review

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By David Giacalone

The Schenectady City Council may decide as early as next week to abort its environmental review of the controversial dock at Riverside Park. If it issues what is called a “negative declaration” under SEQRL (the State Environmental Quality Review law), all environmental review will end, with no formal public input or review by other agencies on the topic.

That’s how eager city leaders are to spend the \$400,000 offered by the state Canal Corp., rather than being heroes by not accepting a grant that would put a dock in the wrong place and incur much additional expense and liability.

Ending environmental review would mean the city won’t take a serious look at important issues raised by dock opponents. It won’t look closer to see if a giant, metallic, unsupervised public dock would harm the scenic views or the relative tranquility and laid-back use the park is known for; reduce the quality of life of the nearby Stockade residents, some of whom live only 200 feet from the proposed site for the dock, by bringing in added traffic, noise and boisterous (if not illegal) activities; or threaten the character of its pride-and-joy Stockade Historic District, which needs committed and contented homeowners to ensure its continued success.

Ignoring the threshold

The concept of “environment” as defined in SEQRL includes protection for “resources of . . . historic or aesthetic significance” and the “existing community or neighborhood character.” Those are values particularly important for the park and the Stockade neighborhood. In addition, there is a low threshold for triggering a full environmental review under SEQRL. An EIS [Environmental Impact Statement] is required if “the action may include the potential for at least one significant adverse environmental impact.”

Despite this low threshold, the city has found no adverse effects that might be potentially large or significant enough to require more environmental review, in the one SEQRL form it has completed — the Environmental Assessment Form (EAF). The EAF is essentially a questionnaire and

checklist to help organize and consider possible adverse effects; it does not require reports or investigations and is considered too preliminary to be used for public comment.

In fact, the city never bothered to check boxes in its EAF to indicate the potential magnitude of some of the most important issues relating to the dock — i.e., impact on the use of the park, on its scenic views and aesthetics, and on the historic district and the neighborhood. The city seems to be on the verge of using the poor job it did on the EAF as an excuse to avoid the “hard look” required by SEQR.

As city historian Don Rittner stated, in a study for the Planning Department in August 2007, Riverside Park is valued as a “relatively tranquil place to enjoy a magnificent view of the Mohawk River from the walking path and park benches.”

Taking a different stance

That’s why the City Council approved a resolution in 1998 opposing development that would change the “special nature” of the park and “disadvantage the homeowners who are the caretakers in this Historic District of national importance.” It concluded that Riverside Park “best serves residents and visitors as a quiet place to view the natural beauty of the Mohawk River.”

For similar reasons, Stockade residents voted 2-to-1 against the proposed dock, with 270 residents also signing a petition in opposition.

We need further environmental review because no current or prior study or plan for use of the city’s waterfront has considered Riverside Park to be an appropriate location for a dock. And, because the only fact that has changed is the grant by the Canal Corp.

For example, the Mohawk River Waterfront Revitalization Plan for Schenectady County was just released in June. It looked at the feasibility of placing a dock at Riverside Park, and it specifically notes there are constraints on development at the park because of limited access and parking, and the “character of the residential community.”

This situation, it concluded, “inhibits any significant expansion of use other than to improve it as a scenic overlook and to improve pedestrian and bicyclist access and connection to adjoining areas.”

We also need further environmental review because there apparently was little or no factual investigation prior to seeking the grant, and surely none on the dock’s effects since the city decided, seemingly by default, that it had to move the dock from the recommended and popular location at East Front Street to the very different situation at Riverside Park.

What will dock look like?

Finally, we wonder how the city or anyone could know the impact of the dock on the beautiful scenic views of and from Riverside Park when no one knows what the dock will look like. The city has not produced a single artist’s rendition of the proposed dock, a structure 300 feet long, 10 feet wide and 6 feet high. We need to know, for starters:

- 1) How far it will jut out into the Mohawk (the plan seems to show 40 feet).
- 2) The size and shape of its profile and the boats.
- 3) What it will look like from various places in the park (e.g. the esplanade, the asphalt walking trail, benches such as the one near Ingersoll Avenue).

Readers can see dozens of photos to help them decide on whether the dock will harm the aesthetics and enjoyment of Riverside Park, or the quality of life of nearby residents, by going to <http://tinyurl.com/DockSEQR>

An EIS would allow the city to explain why, in the face of prior evaluations to the contrary, a dock can now be installed without significant adverse effects. Pro or con on the dock, all of us who value the residential nature of the Stockade Historic District and the special nature of Riverside Park will benefit if the city takes the “hard look” at potentially significant environmental effects contemplated by SEQR.

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