

Warning signs sought after drowning at dam

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BY
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Along the Olentangy River north of the 5th Avenue dam, there are no signs, no barriers, nothing to warn people of the danger downstream.

A group has been working with the city to obtain state money for warning signs on that stretch of the river, where a man died after tumbling over the dam early Saturday.

It's still unclear whether a sign would have persuaded Christian J. Hallam or his friend, Greg Pollina, to leave the river before they went over the dam in their inner-tube raft early Saturday morning. The roiling water under the dam sucked the 20-year-old Hallam in, preventing him from escaping.

The Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed wants signs installed warning people of the dangers of the so-called low-head dams and where to carry vessels around them.

"Perhaps a sign there would have alerted them to a problem," said Heather Dean, the group's watershed coordinator.

The application deadline for funding isn't until Nov. 1. Only \$53,000 is available statewide for the signs, said Phil Miller, an administrator with the state Division of Watercraft.

Hallam's drowning has prompted more calls for the city to remove the 5th Avenue dam.

"Ecologically, environmentally and safetywise, it shouldn't be there," said William J. Mitsch, an Ohio State University environmental professor who has long advocated the dam's

removal.

The city had planned to demolish the dam this year. But \$118 million inserted into a federal appropriations bill to help pay for the demolition was removed last year. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is trying to secure the money for 2010.

The city owns the 5th Avenue dam, but the state has no laws requiring it to place warning signs, said Rick Tilton, spokesman of the city's Public Utilities Department.

At the very least, the city should have put up signs and strung barrels across the river to warn people, Mitsch said. He pointed to similar measures the city took upstream from the Greenlawn Avenue dam on the Scioto River south of Downtown. There, the city has strung a series of large reddish-orange spheres to warn boaters.

The city has been proactive before. In 1990, it put up signs saying, "DANGER! NO SWIMMING. NO WADING" near dams after several drownings.

Pollina's father, Frank Pollina, wants to see signs near the dam.

"All of a sudden they went over it, no warning," the elder Pollina said, according to what his son and ex-wife told him.

He said his son was distraught over losing someone so close and didn't want to talk about it. The two young men had been classmates at Worthington Kilbourne High School.

"He tried to get to Christian but couldn't," Pollina said.

Pollina and Hallam launched their tandem innertube raft at Tuttle Park about 6 a.m. Saturday. They floated south before heading over the dam. The water pushed Pollina away, and he swam to the western bank.

Hallam's body was recovered after 2 p.m. Sunday.

"The water downstream of the dams is very turbulent," said Mark Ogden, administrator of the state's dam safety engineering program. "It's difficult for someone to swim out."

Because of the danger, and to improve water quality through natural stream flows, other dams are being removed this year, including two on the Olentangy south of Delaware and two on Alum Creek in Franklin County.

Columbus was to demolish the low-head dam at 5th Avenue this year, but federal money to help pay for the work was cut.

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