

Windmill gets new site on Fox River in Little Chute

By J.E. Espino

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LITTLE CHUTE — Since last summer, the only thing coming between a private organization and its proposal to build a \$2.5 million windmill and visitor center is a difference of about \$1 million.

That soon could change for Little Chute Windmill Inc., which went public with its construction plans in the downtown and a fundraising campaign in the fall of 2003.

The nonprofit group has struck a partnership with the village to relocate its project to Island Park, between the Fox River and canal system.

In doing so, the windmill organization is free to place on the market a half-acre of land it owns in the 100 block of W. Main Street for \$300,000 to \$350,000, said Don De Groot, windmill committee president.

That money, along with \$500,000 the village could contribute toward the project, will help bring Little Chute Windmill Inc. much closer to its goal.

"Our intent is to make this happen," De Groot said of the windmill project. "I just think that there would be a lot more interest in the Fox Valley with a development on the river."

The move couldn't come at a better time for the village because it gives officials the impetus to tap into several funding sources to replace the existing inoperable lift bridge over the Fox River locks canal. The proposed bridge would allow vehicles to access the park.

Village Administrator Chuck Kell said he is looking to contact county officials and the federal Department of Transportation in hopes of securing funds for the bridge, estimated at a cost of \$5 million to \$6 million. The village is working with an aggressive timeline and would want the work to be completed by 2009 and may need to seek federal lawmakers' help in earmarking funds.

The Fox River Navigational System Authority has pending plans to open the lock. But for it to happen, village officials need to negotiate with the Wisconsin Historical Society on the removal of the Mill Street bridge, estimated at \$340,000. The bridge was built in the 1920s but over the years the decking, metal structure and mechanical parts have deteriorated to the point that if it were lifted, it would fall into the canal.

If successful with securing outside funding for the bridge, the village would kick in about \$500,000 toward the windmill project, Kell said.

"I can't imagine the community doesn't want to seize on a situation like that," Kell said of the prospects for the riverfront park.

A comprehensive parks study has designated the 5.8-acre park for special use. Currently, it is not getting enough use.

"There are so many things that come together. It's so worth looking at," said Village President Chuck Fischer.

Kell said the windmill project would give the park a new focus, showcase the village's Dutch heritage to tourists either arriving on bus or by boat and pave the way for the creation of a trail system that could connect with Heesakker Park.

Given the money that could soon be flowing in means the windmill group can move ahead with its plans to order windmill parts from a Dutch millwright, De Groot said.

"We're just happy to work with the village," he said. "It's helping the village, and it's helping the windmill. We're excited about the location. It was one of the original sites we had looked at (for the project). ... Windmill and water kind of fit together."

Kell said it was a step in the right direction for the Fox Cities' economic viability.

"This is something you're not going to find anywhere else — a windmill tourist attraction, a historic canal and a mile-long riverfront parkway trail system. Where are you going to find that? Nowhere," Kell said.