PETOSKEY — Petoskey officials are still collecting input on the future of the Lake Street Dam.

The city has been exploring the possibility of removing the dam for some time — although officials have not definitively committed to doing so, and, even if they did choose to tear it down, the process would take several years. Nevertheless, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

The Bear River is seen flowing near the dam along Lake
has obtained a grant of nearly $50,500 from the Great Lakes Fishery Trust to begin an engineering study on the site.

Petoskey officials and representatives from the Watershed Council jointly hosted an open house last week at Petoskey City Hall, allowing residents to offer their perspectives in person. But the parties are continuing to collect public input through an online survey, which can be found on the Petoskey and Tip of the Mitt websites, or at this link: https://bit.ly/2ZWt93G.

The current phase of the project would cost a total of $66,000, which includes project coordination, the engineering study, community outreach efforts and water quality monitoring. The city would be expected to foot 25 percent of those costs, or $16,500. City council members approved the grant application in February.

Prior to that, in September, a study conducted by OMH Advisors showed that the piece of infrastructure, stationed across Lake Street from city hall, is still viable, but that further investigation into the longevity and impacts of the dam were warranted. Officials estimate it to be more than 80 years old.

Many communities are engaging in “free spanning” efforts — removing barriers to the natural flow of rivers to prevent hazardous flooding and encourage natural fish migration patterns. Last year, Traverse City-based Conservation Resource Alliance completed its effort to remove the Lake Kathleen Dam on the Maple River, near Pellston. It was the last piece of a yearslong effort to remove all the barriers along that river.

But such efforts come with a number of other considerations. In addition to obtaining proper permits, permission from owners and community engagement, water quality must be monitored continually. And, while one benefit of “free spanning” is to encourage the free flow of species, steps must be taken to keep invasive species out.

“The main focus of the engineering study is to look at alternatives to improve fish passage within the Bear River, certainly while preventing the sea lamprey from swimming upstream,” Petoskey city manager Rob Straebel said at a past city council meeting.

Ultimately, the engineering study will simply offer some potential solutions for the city to have on hand should the need arise. Those solutions could mean removing the dam completely, replacing it or undertaking other long-term improvements.

The specific grant obtained for the project is the Habitat Protection and Restoration grant for Targeted Land and Capital Efforts. According to information from the Great Lakes Fishery Trust website, those grants could be awarded up to $400,000 and go to projects, including barrier removal, which "preserve essential habitat; protect, restore, and stabilize important fish habitats; and increase habitat availability."

Partners in the project include Michigan Trout Unlimited, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians and Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

A public open house on the project is slated for late August, and a website will be devoted to gaining additional public feedback. Results of the study are expected to be highlighted in another meeting in May 2020.