

Introduction to Rowing

Rowers comprise one of the largest organized user-groups of Argo Pond. The University of Michigan (UM) men’s crew team began rowing on Argo in 1976. They were joined by the Ann Arbor Rowing Club (AARC), an organization open to the public, in the early 1980s, the Huron High crew team in 1993, and the Pioneer High crew team in 1999. In all, about 600 rowers are active in these organizations annually, while a few additional rowers use the Huron unaffiliated.

Throughout the Huron River planning process, the Huron River and Impoundment Management Plan (HRIMP) Committee has engaged representatives from the rowing community to learn about their needs and preferences regarding rowing venues, space, and facilities that will help their programs continue to grow and succeed in the future.

Rowing on Argo Pond

Argo Pond, although S-shaped and narrow at some points, provides 3200 meters of rowable water, from Argo Dam to the pedestrian bridge just downstream of Barton Dam. It is the longest stretch of water in Ann Arbor, and the users have learned to maneuver every obstacle and pinch point.

Peak use times on Argo Pond are April-June and September-November, when all of the teams are practicing in the afternoon/evening (Table 1). Although all groups are not on the water at the same time, practices do overlap, and the boathouse, dock, and water can become crowded.

Table 1. Use of Argo Pond by Rowing Organizations

Organization	Members; Coaches	Annual River Trips	Rowing Season	Rowing Hours
UM Men’s Crew	50-70; 6	9,000	Mar-Jun; Aug-Nov	M-F: 6:30-8:30 am, 4:15-6:45 pm
Ann Arbor Rowing Club	300 adult, 55 Youth; 25	11,000	Apr-Nov	M-F: 5:30-7 am, 6:30-8 pm; Sat: 8-10:30 am
Huron High School	75-80; 6	10,000	Mar-Jun; Aug-Nov	M-F: 5:30-7:30 pm
Pioneer High School	85-90; 6	11,000	Mar-Jun; Aug-Nov	M-F: 4-6:15 pm

On land, all the rowing organizations operate from a single dock at Bandemer Park. The AARC, Huron, and Pioneer teams share the Beal Boathouse - constructed by the city in 2002 and being repaid through rental fees - but this facility is already filled to capacity. During the season, space restrictions require teams to store some of their boats, oars, and other expensive equipment outdoors. The UM team has its own smaller boathouse at Bandemer Park. The rowing teams use mostly four and eight-person boats. At a typical practice, each team has four to eight boats on the water, and the teams break into smaller groups that include 2-4 boats and a coach’s launch.

The rowing community believes that if it continues to grow, then additional rowing venues will need to be considered for expansion beyond the Argo impoundment. If Ann Arbor decides that Argo Dam is to be removed, all of the existing rowing organizations, along with a potential new Skyline High School program, will likely need to relocate to two other impoundments. There may be engineered options for removing the dam and maintaining a rowable impoundment, but this should be evaluated. Currently rowers are “weed whacking” the pond near the dock as a management method for nuisance weed growth. This practice, while providing an immediate solution, actually facilitates the growth and spread of nuisance weeds. If rowing continues on Argo Pond, an aquatic vegetation management strategy that does not exacerbate the existing problem must be employed.

Current use of Bandemer Park involves crossing an ungated railroad crossing and accessing Main Street, which is close to M-14, with heavy traffic. These are safety concerns and will likely need to be resolved with an additional road constructed from the bridge on the north side of Bandemer Park.

Exploration of Existing and Alternate Rowing Venues

Because removing Argo dam is under discussion, options for rowing were discussed among committee members and some members of the rowing community. These represent some of the information and opinions generated at meetings to date.

The rowing community believes that Argo Pond is best possible location for rowing in the City, for several reasons.

1) Water: The water is good, flat, and the length is entirely rowable with few hazards.

2) Accessibility: the location is central to all participants, and has the smallest transportation-related carbon footprint of any of the venues; many rowers bike to the facility. In addition, if a connecting road is extended down to the current boathouse location, Argo has no railroad crossing access conflicts.

3) Facility and parking: there is an existing boathouse structure with adequate parking, unlike all other venues; in addition, the docks are new.

Argo dam facilitates the ability to have rowing - a world class sport – in Ann Arbor. This facility typically plays host to one regatta each year which draws several hundred participants/spectators to the city. Rowing is a major coeducational scholastic, varsity sport for the two existing high schools, accounting for almost 200 students, the majority of which are scholar athletes (honor roll academic achievement). It is second in single-season subscription only to football and is a two-season sport, which makes it the highest athlete count of any sport. Many of these rowers stay active through the summer using the Argo/Bandemer facility. Currently, Argo/Bandemer is the only rowing facility available that is also centrally located for all three high schools. The Beal boathouse has the ability to be expanded to meet increased need and a study has been done to demonstrate that feasibility. Because the boathouses and canoe livery exist on opposite sides of Argo Pond conflict between user groups is minimized and not a factor as might be the case in other alternate locations. The current facility functions as a larger unified community-where high school athletes, adult masters athletes and collegiate athletes may interact.

“The vision of the rowing community in Ann Arbor is to continue to offer and support excellent rowing programs to the community in a location that is most accessible to the community at large. As stewards of Bandemer Park we fully support efforts to mitigate the effects of our actions, and are actively pursuing low-noise, electric and other “green” alternatives to current operations. We envision also an expanded boathouse facility on Argo Pond, our venue of choice and best location for rowing in Ann Arbor, that reflects the commitment of the community to the high school varsity rowing programs and community recreational rowing programs that are among the largest and best in the State.”

Any impending action on the dam which could lead to its removal warrants a viable community approved and funded alternative to permit an uninterrupted scholastic and recreational rowing venue.

Barton Pond: In discussions with rowing community representatives, Barton Pond emerged as the top alternative to Argo Pond. Barton, from the dam to the first railroad bridge, offers about 3000 meters of water, including a 1500 meter long, 150 meter wide straightaway that would be good for racing. The UM men’s crew team rowed briefly on Barton Pond in the early 1980s, but the rowers were asked to leave due to traffic, safety, land stewardship, and noise issues. New headset technology can help reduce noise. One drawback of Barton Pond is its mostly privately-owned shoreline. The City owns large parcels along each side of the dam. There is some parking off of Huron River Drive but little room for boat storage on the west side of the dam. Access is via a path under the railroad. There is potentially room on the east side of the dam for a boathouse but access through Barton Hills Village is limited by a private road. In addition, precautions are required to keep users at a safe distance from the dam. It should be noted that Barton Pond could not support all of the current rowing community, and an additional venue would be needed.

Geddes Pond: Geddes is also a possible alternative to Argo Pond, perhaps moreso for the high school programs, but it has some distinct limitations. While Geddes Pond is already heavily used by canoeists and kayakers via the Gallup Park livery, the present peak use times for livery do not significantly overlap with the high school and UM rowing seasons. The length of water available for rowing is distinctly shorter than Argo, about 2400 meters from Geddes Dam to the island chain pedestrian bridge, impacting optimal

distance training programs. Longer rowing venues would require rebuilding the pedestrian bridge along with landscape sculpting and allowing rowing inside the island chain. User conflicts are also a significant concern. If rowing does occur on Geddes Pond, City Parks and Recreation staff would like to limit it to the area between the dam and the island chain. Because most canoeists turn around at the island chain, limiting rowing to the downstream portion of the impoundment would reduce conflicts between rowers and other water users. One advantage of Geddes Pond is the space it offers other rowing teams and spectators for rowing regattas. Gallup Park already has some amenities not currently available at Barton, including restrooms, parking and public access. Geddes Pond is also located very close to Huron High School.

Superior Pond: Presently, Superior only offers about 2000m of rowable water due to impassable bridges. The railroad bridge is passable, but the Starkstrasse Bridge (private road and bridge) has supports that are not aligned with the railroad bridge - there are more supports and they produce a space too narrow to row a shell through without pulling the oars in (problem), and thus are too narrow for passage. In addition, there are several old bridge pilings in the water at a depth of six inches making passage unsafe for rowing boats and for coach launches. Otherwise the water appears excellent, with no other conflicts. Above the railroad bridge (toward the wastewater treatment plant) offers an additional 800m or so of rowable water. Access to city-owned property would have to be arranged, and the railroad cuts off any road access at the present. Superior Pond is an under-utilized resource, one on which rowers would be unlikely to experience user conflicts. While most of the shoreline is privately owned, the City owns some property around Superior Pond that could be considered in the future for recreational uses.

Table 2. Comparison of Rowable Space on Barton, Argo, Geddes and Superior Ponds

Pond	Full Length	Straightaway Breakdown	Straightaway width ranges/averages
Barton	2600 (3100*)	1500, 1100, 500*	140, 140-100, 120-100
Argo	3200	1100, 450, 450, 450, 200	120, 100, 60, 55, 60
Geddes	2700	1000, 500, 500, 750	120-60, 130, 120, 120-60
Superior	2000		

Straightaways: lengths of water that allow for line of site from one end to the other

Straightaway breakdown ordered from downstream to upstream

*indicates a stretch of water on Barton Pond between the Foster Rd. bridge and the first railroad bridge, which may not be accessible. (Table prepared by Joel Batterman, 2006)