Lakes to get raft of new rec features

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Duke could add trails, picnic areas at Jocasee, Keowee access points

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SENECA — Work is expected to begin soon on long-awaited recreational improvements at public access facilities on lakes Keowee and Jocassee in Pickens and Oconee counties.

They may include walking trails, picnic areas and fishing piers.

Robert Cook, spokesman for Duke Energy, said the initial work will include site planning and permitting for specific projects at each site. Duke Energy owns the two lakes.

The planned improvements follow approval earlier this month by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission of Duke Energy's Keowee-Toxaway Recreation Management Plan. Duke submitted the plan in late 2008 after a year-long assessment of existing developed and undeveloped Duke access areas.

That assessment also included evaluations of state and municipal parks, and commercial recreation facilities within and adjacent to the two lakes.

Scott Jolley, Duke Energy recreation planning project manager, said the FERC's approval of the plan means the utility can "begin the final, detailed planning for improvements such as walking trails, restrooms, picnic areas, fishing piers and parking lot lighting."

Cook said Duke expects to have the work completed by August 2016 when its current FERC license expires.

The Friends of Lake Keowee Society (FOLKS), a volunteer group that tracks

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water quality issues on Lake Keowee and its watershed, has generally praised the plan, calling it a "robust" effort for development of several recreational facility enhancements at lake public access areas in the two counties.

Ben Turetzky, executive director of FOLKS, said the organization is pleased with the "passive" plans approved for improving the public access areas on the popular lakes.

"All of those are extremely good," he said, especially plans to install public restrooms at the sites.

Turetzky said FOLKS is working with Duke to get restrooms at all of the designated sites installed at the same time, instead of completing all of the improvements at one site before moving on to the next one.

He said that effort would help eliminate the apparent need among some Lake Keowee boaters to relieve themselves on islands in the lake.

One area that remains a concern for FOLKS is Duke's Access Area Improvement Initiative, where Duke partners with state or local government entities to provide additional or enhanced recreation opportunities on the lakes.

Duke currently leases Devils Fork State Park on Jocassee and South Cove County Park in Oconee County and Mile Creek County Park and Warpath Access Area in Pickens County.

Turetzky said FOLKS continues to have specific concerns about the Warpath area, where efforts are moving forward on a proposed marina, restaurant and hotel.

He said the management plan approved by FERC "has no provisions for the kind of commercial use planned for Warpath Landing."

The plan notes FOLKS' concerns and states that while commercial lodging facilities "are generally not considered public recreation facilities," they are typically built outside the access area boundary.

FERC also points out in its report that the consultation process required by Duke gives FOLKS and other groups the opportunity to assess potential impacts of a project and comment prior to the final approval by the commission.

The lakes plan approved by the commission calls for improvements at nearly all of the public access areas on Jocassee and Keowee, except for High Falls County Park and the World of Energy Picnic Area in Oconee County and three Foothills Trail access areas in Pickens County.

Duke is expected to file a schedule for completing all of the projects, with proposed improvements, by the end of the year.