Pickens County reverses decision

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PICKENS — After voting unanimously last month to reject a relicensing agreement that would determine access to water in Lake Keowee for the next 40 years, members of the Pickens County Council had a change of heart.

The council voted Monday to reconsider and approve the Keowee-Toxaway Stakeholder Relicensing Agreement. The vote to approve came on a 4-2 vote, with Chairman Neil Smith and

PICKENS: Water could be 'a major issue'

FROM PAGE A1

Councilman Trey Whitehurst voting against.

Oconee County approved the agreement last month.

The agreement is a result of work by Duke Energy and 32 stakeholders since 2009 in the process for Duke's application for relicensing for the Keowee-Toxaway project with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERG).

Council members voted 6-0 to oppose the agreement last month, saying language in the agreement did not allow for new intakes in the lake.

Duke Energy spokeswoman Lisa Hoffmann said recently the stakeholder committee "removed the problematic language" to address the concern by Pickens officials that it could be "perceived as a barrier for new public water supply intakes on Lake Keowee."

The motion to reconsider the vote was made by Randy Crenshaw and passed 5-1, with Whitehurst opposed.

"This body sent a very clear message last month that we have an issue with being told how to handle our water," Council member Jennifer Willis said. "We sent that message to Duke, and Duke heard us loud and clear. Duke has addressed the problem that was the biggest concern for this council, and as such, in order to move this process forward, I am in favor of it."

Whitehurst said he opposed the vote because he did not feel comfortable with the process.

"They've come back and said they've taken that (language) out, which they said they couldn't do, and asking us to give them approval for this thing so they can look good in front of FERG," Whitehurst said. "I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

Whitehurst said the issue is going to be a big one in the years to come.

"This is a 40-year plan," Whitehurst said. "Water is going to be a major issue over the next 40 years. Duke worked with Greenville very diligently to force us to buy water from Greenville and never have access to our water on our property."

The current 50-year license expires in August 2016. Jen Huff, project director for Keowee-Toxaway relicensing, said in May that one of the biggest changes in the proposed new agreement is that Duke agrees not to draw down Lake Keowee lower than 10 feet below full stage. Currently Duke can draw down up to 25 feet below full-lake levels.

Smith still has some hsitations, however.

"Even though the language is out, we haven't heard definitively from Duke that they support our right to the water," Smith said.