Public gets voice in Keowee's future

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KEN OSBURN / Staff

Harry Wertheimer cruises on Lake Keowee. He says he's seeing increasing weekend boat traffic on the lake as the Upstate grows, and he worries about public safety.

Lake drives turbines, fills water lines, provides a place to relax

By Anna Simon
CLEMSON BUREAU
asimon@greenvillenews.com

SENECA — Nine years ago, Harry Wertheimer and his wife moved from Upstate New York's Finger Lakes, where he felt crowded weekend waters were unsafe for boating and skiing, to Lake Keowee, where he sees weekend boat traffic increasing as the Upstate grows.

Wertheimer was one of many residents opposed to marina plans in a narrow cove across from Keowee Key they feared would bring more boats and impair safety. A local outcry created rough waters for the developer, and plans were scrapped.

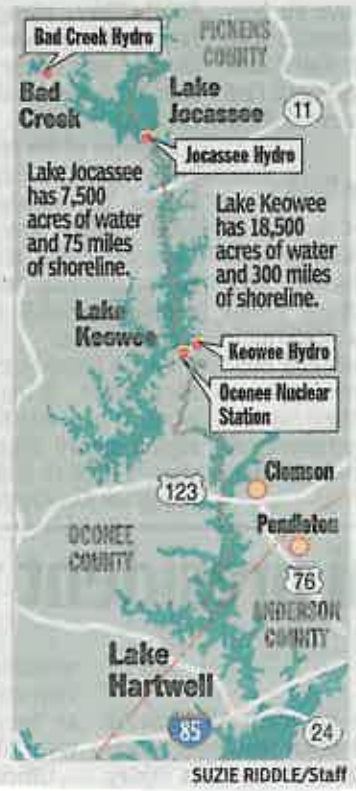
Local laws, though, place little restrictions on commercial development on Keowee, where developments have blossomed.

Water quality in Keowee, known for its cleanliness, has Bob Swank's interest. Swank, president of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, gives Duke Energy credit for its cooperation with the grassroots group that keeps watch against pollutants. But he worries about the impact of growth.

The major long-term threat is phosphorous from human and animal waste and fertilizer, Swank said. "Ultimately as we get more gated communities, even treated wastewater poses a concern," he said.

People who want a say in the future of the lake that is a source of beauty, recreation and drinking water for hundreds of thousands of Upstate residents can voice their opinions at public meetings June 15 at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. at Seneca High.

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SUZIE RIDDLE/Staff

KEOWEE

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The meetings were scheduled by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to hear public concerns about relicensing of Duke's Keowee-Toxaway Project, which includes a 175.7-megawatt hydroelectric plant at Keowee dam a the 710-megawatt pump-storage hydroelectric facility at Jocassee dam.

The 50-year license expires in 2016. The next term would be 30-50 years.

Duke encourages public participation, said Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman. People can ask questions and raise issues at these and future meetings, she said.

Systemwide, Duke's hydro facilities supply 15 percent to 25 percent of the electricity needed to meet peak daily demand, according to the utility.

The role of hydroelectric power could surge in the aftermath of Japan's nuclear crisis, at least in Germany, which plans to replace nuclear energy with renewable sources including hydroelectric power in the next 11 years.

Keowee also provides cooling water for Duke's 2,538-megawatt Oconee Nuclear Station and drinking water for Seneca and the Greenville Water System that serves about 400,000 people in Greenville County, plus wholesale customers in Pickens, Anderson and Laurens counties.

Duke's separate 1,065-megawatt Bad Creek Hydro Electric Project, a mountain reservoir pumped-storage operation above Lake Jocassee, draws from Jocassee. And downstream from Keowee, three U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes also provide water, recreation and electricity.



KEN OSBURN / Staff

The public can discuss recreation and other uses of lakes Keowee and Jocassee during a hearing this month

Duke, according to documents filed with the federal agency, has proposed no new development or changes in existing operations at this time, deferring any proposals until after operational studies are completed. The relicensing process includes environmental, aesthetic, socioeconomic and other studies related to the project.

The key is to balance all water uses, from producing electricity to providing recreation and water supply, while providing electricity at the lowest possible cost for the consumer, Magee said.

Maintaining lake levels are of great interest to Keowee homeowners concerned about docks, shoreline erosion and boating safety, Swank said. Meanwhile, Duke seeks more flexibility to operate Keowee at a lower level in drought and keep more water in Jocassee, Magee said.

Jocassee dropped more than 26 feet during the 2008 drought, while Keowee stayed relatively stable, around five feet low, in part to maintain cooling for the nuclear plant. Lake Hartwell dropped more than 22 feet.

"When rain is plentiful, water supply isn't an issue, but given our history of droughts in this basin, we think it's more prudent to plan with flexibility," Magee said.

Holding a greater reserve in Jocassee is good water-management policy, said Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System that draws from Hartwell.

Greenville Water System, which draws an average of 25 million to 30 million gallons of water a day from Keowee, supports the relicensing that would allow its withdrawal agreement with Duke to continue, said Frank Eskridge, director of governmental and public relations for the system.

The agreement forged in 1973 includes incremental increases for projected growth and currently allows withdrawals of up to 60 million gallons a day now, moving to 90 million gallons a day in 2020. "We have worked very hard to dampen water usage by encouraging smart water use and conservation," Eskridge said.

The water system, which is one of more than 30 stakeholder organizations and agencies that have met since 2009 in the relicensing process, also has agreed to lower withdrawals during drought, Eskridge said. Members of the public interested in progress on the project can sign up to receive newsletters by emailing ktrelicensing@duke-energy.com.

Duke also has information on the project posted at duke-energy.com/lakes/Keowee-toxaway-relicensing.asp.