Residents get window to shape future of lakes

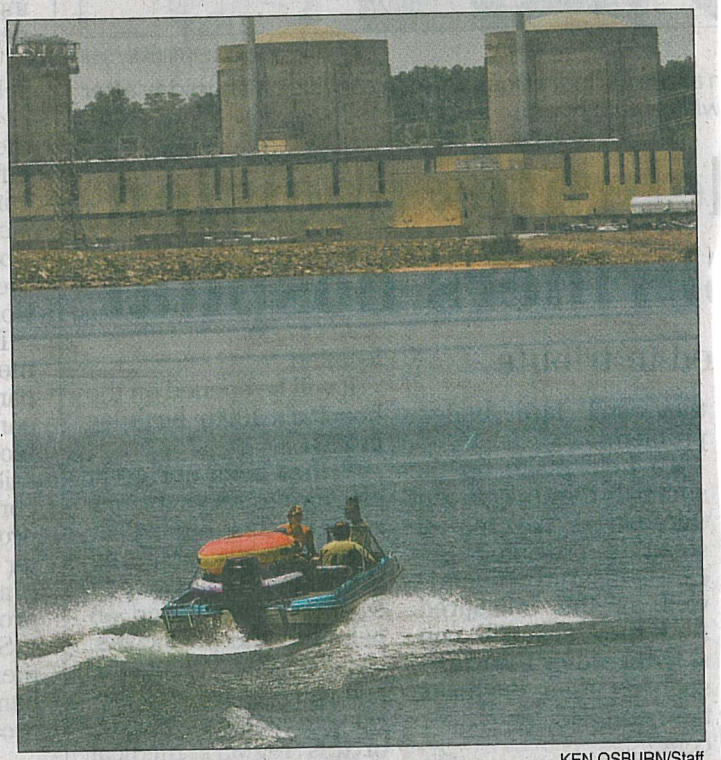


Staff file

Jocassee Hydro Station and dam near Devil's Fork State Park. The earth core dam is 1,750 ft. long x 385 ft. high, and 290 ft. wide at its base. The pump storage station runs four generators and step up transformers capable of producing 230,00 volts.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff



KEN OSBURN/Staff

Boaters enjoy a day on Lake Keowee in the shadow of the Oconee Nuclear Station. Duke's license requires public access for recreation. Plans include more picnic areas, restrooms, parking and courtesy docks where passengers can board boats, walking trails and bank fishing areas.

Licensing gives chance to manage development

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Old promises and unsettled scores are resurfacing as Duke Energy begins to relicense its hydro-electric operations on lakes Keowee and Jocassee with decisions bound to ripple out to future generations of South Carolinians.

"The relicensing is the last opportunity in many of our lifetimes to impact many of the aspects of how the lake system is managed," said Bill Graham, president of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, or FOLKS.

The relicensing process will include input from numerous federal, state and local governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as the public, and concerns that are raised will be part of the discussion, said Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission typically grants these licenses for 30 to 50 years. Duke's current 50-year license expires in 2016. Concerns of the grassroots nonprofit FOLKS range from commercial development to interbasin water transfers — issues that already have garnered debate and are likely to continue to do so as the Upstate grows.

Memories of the original licensing nearly half a century ago aren't forgotten.

"This is a time to settle old scores," said Dennis Chastain, a northern Pickens County outdoorsman who feels Upstate residents haven't been fairly compensated for the loss of whitewater corridors, rare plants and cultural and archeological artifacts in the former Jocassee and Keowee valleys.

"I want to make sure that Duke honors their word not to develop that lake. That was a huge point they drove home to us, that it wasn't going to be developed," said Debbie Fletcher, whose family home place is now under the Jocassee waters.

Four rivers — the Whitewater, Thompson, Toxaway and Horsepasture — created 30 miles of whitewater that could have been "the Yosemite of the East-

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ern United States" and flooding of the Jocassee valley destroyed 60 percent of the world's Oconee Bell habitat, Chastain said. "We didn't really know in the 1960s what a rare resource Jocassee was. If we had, I think we would have fought harder then to have that loss mitigated."

As a child, Fletcher loved splashing in the Whitewater River that flowed by the Attakulla Lodge, a former seasonal hotel her family owned in the Jocassee Valley. She was 17 when the valley was flooded. Now 55, she scuba dives and pontoons in the lake and wants its clear water and largely undeveloped shoreline protected forever.

Homes ring much of Keowee's 300-mile shoreline where residents and developers share a stake in its future.

"It's encouraging to see that Duke is taking steps to secure the future quality of this great regional resource for generations to come," said Jim Anthony, founder and president of The Cliffs Communities.

Duke recently started a five-year process to renew the license for its Keowee-Toxaway Hydroelectric Project that has the capacity to produce 820 megawatts of electricity — enough to power 656,000 average homes annually. Duke plans to submit the license application in 2014 in order to allow the commission two years for review, Magee said.

The hydro-electric project is near the center of a growth corridor running from Raleigh, N.C., through Charlotte and Atlanta to Birmingham, Ala., that depends on Appalachian Mountain streams for water, said James Kundell, an emeritus professor and director of the environmental policy program at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia.

The streams flow through the Piedmont "as relatively small rivers" and geology provides little natural water storage, so reservoirs are increasingly important in meeting demand for water, Kundell said. Meeting the demand for water is further complicated by how climate change could affect weather patterns that bring drought and tropical storms.

"So the question is how much flexibility is being built into the FERC licenses to address unforeseen consequences," said Kundell, who chaired of Georgia's Water Plan Advisory Committee and was the lead staff person for the General Assembly's Joint Water Plan Study Committee.

Water quality and quantity, aquatic life, botanical, cultural and recreational resources and lake use permitting are areas of concern for Chris Starker, project associate for Upstate Forever's rural waters pro-

The hydro-electric project "has been an asset to our community," in terms of providing reliable and affordable power that enhances quality of life for residents and has helped attract businesses, said state Sen. Thomas Alexander, whose district includes the lakes.

As the relicensing process proceeds, Alexander said he wants to be sure that environmental needs, water use, water quality, resource management and continued public access to lakes for recreation are "addressed appropriately."

Upstate members of FOLKS want to minimize commercialization of public access areas. Improvements such as restrooms, more parking and picnic areas, walking trails, fishing piers and courtesy boat ramps "fit well into the overall environment," Gra-

ham said.

Development of hotels and large restaurants geared for boat traffic are another matter, he said, fearing that concentrations of night boat traffic and consumption of alcohol could lead to deadly situations.

Grant Cunningham, a Clemson University professor specializing in natural resource management and environmental issues, did a study for Oconee County on development of a potential marina on Lake Keowee and cited issues including the impact of pump-out stations and gas docks on water quality as well as crowding, noise, boat traffic and the necessity of dredging to create a deep area for moorings.

Jim London, a Clemson University planning professor and member of Pickens County Council, said there is a lot of pressure on Lake Keowee for recreational opportunities and development of the shoreline. "It's important that we maintain public access to the lakefront," London said.

Duke Energy turned its Warpath Landing over to Pickens County and development including a lodge, cabins, a marina and a restaurant are "in the planning and design" stage now, London said. The project, being developed through a public-private partnership, includes public access points and the cabins and lodge will available for rental, "similar to what people would find at a state park," London said.

Other potential development, such as dry boat storage, could bring both good and evil — in terms of storing boats in a way that keeps gas and oil from seeping into the water but could put hundreds of boats into the water in close proximity, Graham said.

Water supply is another issue of concern. Greenville Water System isn't taking close to its allotted 150 million gallons a day from Lake Keowee — currently usage is around 40 million gallons per day, however demand will increase with growth, Graham said.

All of these things will be examined and the stakeholder team will determine what kind of studies may be needed, Magee said.

Because Upstate Forever is dedicated to protecting special places, the membership-based organization is considering making a formal application to be on the stakeholder team, Starker said.

Duke's license requires public access for recreation, and the company has "invested quite a bit of money in that and have plans to do more," Magee said. Plans include more picnic areas, restrooms, parking and courtesy docks where passengers can board boats, walking trails and bank fishing areas, she said.

Jocassee is unlikely to see much more development, Magee said. Its shoreline is only 75 miles and a large percentage of it is owned by the state, she said.

Concerning interbasin transfer of water, Magee said Duke's contract with Greenville Water System would change only if the state changes conditions on its permit. In other hydro relicensing projects on other Duke basins, water providers have been included in the process, she said.

A project of this size "does change the landscape," and Duke has provided resources in return, Magee said, citing some examples: the Foothills Trail, Devils Fork State Park, the Keowee-Toxaway State Natural Area and the 1990s sale of 50,000 acres in the Jocassee Gorges at a greatly reduced price to natural resource agencies in the Carolinas.

"Duke has been a good partner of ours for a number of years," said Chad Prosser, director of the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. "The cabins at Devils Fork were funded by Duke Energy completely."

Although Chastain and Cunningham have concerns for the future, both said Duke has done a good job of managing the lakes. The public does need to be involved to ensure that will continue, Cunningham said.

People can stay informed by attending meetings, writing letters and e-mails, and can request electronic updates and other information, Magee said. Information is available on Duke's Web site at www.duke-energy.com/lakes/keowee-toxaway-relicensing.asp.