Safety measures led to 'good year' at Fall Creek

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee officials say an increased law enforcement presence at Fall Creek Landing on Lake Keowee played a role in helping the park enjoy its first season without a drowning in several years.

Sheriff Mike Crenshaw said a meeting between county and Duke Energy officials last year led to a number of increased safety measures, including putting out boulders and safety signage at the park to deter unlawful parking, and funding from Duke helped pay for overtime for deputies to have officers on-site during the summer months.

The drowning of a 20-year-old Six Mile man in August 2015 reportedly marked the 15th death in 21 years near Fall Creek Landing — an area that is popular in part because it provides access to "the rock," which swimmers jump off of into the lake.

Crenshaw said two deputies were present on weekends last summer from Memorial Day to Labor Day and would turn visitors away once the park reached capacity.

"During the heat of the summer, we were turning away 75 to 85 cars per hour," the sheriff told county council's law enforcement, public safety, heal and welfare committee Tuesday. "It was constant."

Crenshaw said Duke Energy officials were "very pleased" with the results of the new safety measures taken for the summer of 2016, and another meeting is planned for next month to discuss future plans.

The sheriff also said his office has purchased two new boats that are "ready to roll" and will lead to a "much greater presence" on area lakes this year.

"I think we're going to be able to have a boat on the water during the summer months," he said. "We're trying to negotiate that now. We're going to be working with (the S.C. Department of

SEE FALL CREEK, PAGE A3

FOR MORE

To read a related editorial, turn to page A4.

FROM PAGE A1

Natural Resources) — if they've got a boat on the Seneca River or Tugaloo or Hartwell, then we may go to Keowee or vice versa.

"With DNR, with our boats, there may be some days we may have three boats. We also will be using our helicopters. When they go up, they'll be checking the lakes. If we've got a lot of folks, a lot of traffic in one area, that's where we'll direct our patrols."

Crenshaw confirmed with Oconee County Fire Chief Charlie King that there were no drowning deaths or even any emergency responses needed at Fall Creek last summer, which was a first in many years, and which he termed "a good year."

"I think we're moving in the right direction," Crenshaw said.

The sheriff told Councilman Wayne McCall he didn't expect interest in visiting the park to wane in the foreseeable future.

"It's free — if that changes, I don't know if the draw will change — but there's certainly a lot of interest from people who want to go to Fall Creek Landing," he said.

County administrator Scott Moulder said one reason the increased safety measures were effective was not only having deputies on site, but also reducing congestion at the landing.

"One of the biggest issues we had was getting emergency personnel into the landing when the area was overcrowded and cars were parked all over the road," Moulder told The Journal. "Now we can better control the population in the landing and preserve areas for emergency response to get in the area if we do have a call."

As for the costs, Crenshaw said the county charges $37 per hour for its deputies to work extra duty, with the deputy earning $30 per hour and the county keeping the remainder to pay workers compensation and other costs.

There were 15 weekends involved in the initiative, and Duke Energy paid half of the cost for the entire year, which included two fiscal years — for a total of $6,660, or a little more than $3,000 per fiscal year.

Crenshaw said his office absorbed the cost of the other seven weekends by paying overtime to deputies through its budget, with an average overtime rate of $25 per hour, which would equate to the county paying about $4,000 out of its budget.

The sheriff said it is "safe to say" the county and Duke Energy spent about $11,000 to have two deputies at the landing on the weekends from late May through early September, but the goal was to increase safety and prevent drowning deaths.

"It worked this past year," he told The Journal. "This is a lot of money, but if we can save just one life, it is a small price to pay. I can't help but think the ones we turned away because of safety concerns with parking or took to jail that were showing up with open containers of alcohol and, in some instances, illegal drugs avoided being another casualty of drowning at 'the rock.'"

Fall Creek Landing has two separate access points with two entrances. Most of the boat access occurs at the north access, while most of the recreation day use takes place at the south access.

Oconee Parks, Recreation and Tourism director Phil Shirley said in addition to the increased law enforcement presence deterring unlawful or unsafe activity, the deputies also helped provide patrons with directions to other available recreation access points when Fall Creek was full.

"In talking with Sheriff Crenshaw after last season as well as with Duke Energy just (Thursday) morning, we feel this a step in the right direction and are already planning a meeting early spring to discuss 2017," Shirley said.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com