



A solution

on the way?

Duke to place rip-rap near popular spot in attempt to curb drownings

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SALEM — After 18 drownings in 26 years, more precautions are being taken on the route to “jumping off rock,” a popular spot on Lake Keowee accessed through Fall Creek Landing.

At the May 21 Oconee County Council meeting, chairman Julian Davis read a letter from Duke Energy, stating the company’s commitment to pursue “additional measures to address the drownings” in the area.

With the caveat of working with other entities and fish spawning

windows, Duke Energy plans to install “partial or full rip-rap from the mainland” into the channel near the rock by summer 2020. Typically used for erosion control around shorelines or other areas, rip-rap is made up of loose stones of a variety of sizes.

The site’s popularity, and seemingly easy access, has caught the attention of visitors and locals for years.

Authorities have also taken notice as the number of drownings increases on what seems to be an annual basis. County officials

After a “very, very busy weekend” at Fall Creek Landing, Oconee County Emergency Services director Scott Krein said there were no major incidents at Fall Creek Landing during Memorial Day. The passage to “jumping off rock,” a popular spot on Keowee, is set to look much different this time next year, as Duke Energy has committed to placing rip-rap to help curb drownings in the area. Emergency and law enforcement officials were on hand through the holiday weekend to monitor activity at the rock, which has seen nearly 20 drownings in 26 years.

PHOTOS SPECIAL
TO THE JOURNAL

SEE SOLUTION, PAGE A5

SOLUTION: County 'grateful'

FROM PAGE A1

have discussed several options in recent years to help prevent tragedies, and the timing finally lined up to get the right people in the right places.

"I do think this is a great way to limit drownings in a specific area, because it changes the access to the island," Davis said. "What Duke is talking about could result in injuries, but it would keep them out of the water. A twisted ankle is better than drowning."

Oconee County Emergency Services director Scott Krein said no incidents were reported in the area this week despite a "very, very busy weekend." Boats were in the water and deputies on patrol to help with parking during the Memorial Day holiday.

County administrator Amanda Brock said the county and Duke Energy have known about the issues for years and she was pleased a conference call about Fall Creek access was able to take place.

"We requested them to look into safety

measures," she said, "and we're extremely grateful that they took our request this year to another level. It's not that we weren't taking it seriously before, but it shows a stronger commitment going forward."

No exact plans have been determined, as several entities will be involved in the decision-making process. Councilman John Elliott, who represents Salem, said the solution may not be pretty, but will provide an additional safety element for visitors.

"My understanding is that it's more something to grab onto, not necessarily to walk across" he said. "If that's the case, that's better than what we have now. I think doing nothing is not doing the right thing for the citizens of Oconee County and the tourists who visit our lakes. Safety is No. 1 — there's nothing more important."

While the rip-rap extension is a year away and Krein said he and his team will focus on keeping this summer safe, the increased safety measures would be welcome.

The channel between the rock and the mainland is classified as navigable, meaning boater safety will also be considered in the plan, which Elliott voiced concerns about.

The rip-rap will be contingent on what is approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, according to the commitment letter from Duke Energy. Additional signage warning of the dangers will be placed on the mainland and island by the end of May, according to the letter.

While the work may be a year away, Davis said he appreciated the commitment from Duke Energy to address what has become a serious safety issue for the county.

"It may not be a perfect solution, but something is finally going to happen," Davis said. "Something is better than nothing."

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