

Officials OK barriers to reduce Fall Creek drownings

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WALHALLA — After months of discussion between multiple parties — and three drownings in 2019 alone — barriers are scheduled to be in place at Fall Creek Landing by the end of the year.

Oconee County Council chairman Julian Davis told council Tuesday night that Duke Energy's Emily DeRob-

erts had reached out to him that day, informing him the rip-rap and steel fence should be installed in the next three months.

"Your request has been approved from Duke (Energy) and the Army Corps of Engineers to do the rip-rap, as well as install a fence that will extend into the water to discourage people from accessing the island from land," Davis read. "We hope this will be enough

to continue to make this area safer. It is our intent to do everything in our power to create the safest atmosphere that we can in this area.

"This would be completed with intent — per weather, obviously — by the end of the year."

Davis and Councilman Glenn Hart both thanked fellow Councilman Wayne

SEE BARRIERS, PAGE A5

McCall for keeping safety at the landing in the forefront of council's mind to push forward with making this happen.

"Is this 100 percent guarantee somebody isn't going to drown there? No, but I think it's a step in the right direction," Davis said.

Councilman Paul Cain said the project was a "long time coming" in an effort to prevent more drownings at the popular recreation site.

Fall Creek Landing in Salem is one of the first public access points on the northern end of Lake Keowee and has seen 20 drownings in 26 years. Council has discussed potential ways to deter visitors from traveling to "jumping off rock," a popular island adjacent to the landing, and finally made headway this year.

Oconee County administrator Amanda Brock said an August discussion was the "first step in open dialogue with local and statewide stakeholders and the government agencies involved in this process."

Several regulatory agencies were consulted throughout the process,

and any work in the water had to consider fish spawning seasons, Duke Energy said in its initial May commitment letter.

"We feel that it is due time for Duke Energy

and Oconee County to put our heads together to find a solution that will work for the safety of visitors to Oconee County and our citizens," Brock said Tuesday night. "An average of one drowning a year is unacceptable and has been. But, in

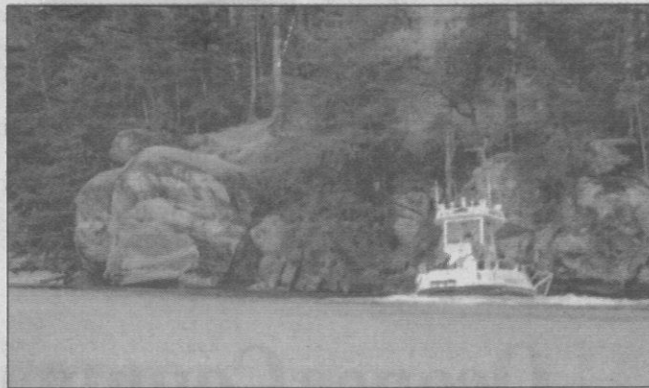
the past, the solution has not been so obvious to us for various reasons. An opportunity has arisen for us to combine our efforts, come up with a viable solution and see how it goes from here."

The fence discussed in August was a "large-scale, more industrial type" to deter visitors from crossing to the rock by foot, Brock said.

All the drowning victims since Oconee County Coroner Karl Addis began keeping records in 1993 have been male, and none were from Oconee. Of the 20 victims, 16 were between the ages of 16 and 27. "The issue at Fall

Creek isn't the danger of jumping off the rock into the water, it's the waist-deep and shallow sandbar that goes out from a point over to the island," Oconee County Fire Chief Charlie King said after an April drowning. "It's very narrow, and if you step off, it's a very steep drop-off into deep water. It can happen for a split second for people who go down and won't resurface."

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An emergency boat drives past "jumping off rock" at Fall Creek Landing after a drowning in 2015. After 20 deaths in 26 years, officials are installing safety barriers in an effort to prevent drownings at the site.

FILE

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Amanda Brock
Oconee County administrator