

Woodlake residents hire wetlands expert

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VASS — Property owners in Woodlake are concerned that their efforts to restore the community's lake will be thwarted if a developer converts the area into wetlands.

Woodlake residents have been trying to get control of a dam and land on which a lake it once formed was located. They hope to repair the dam and bring back the lake.

The residents won a \$162.5 million judgment in March against Woodlake CC Corp., which owns the lake and the remnants of the dam.

A consulting firm owed money by Woodlake CC Corp. has executed its judgment against the corporation, which is expected to force an auction of the corporation's assets. A date for the auction has not been set.

The property owners have formed a group to bid on the property if it comes up for sale, according to a document on a website created by the residents.

The owners hired a wetlands expert after hearing a rumor that developers might be interested in buying the lake properties. The developers might want to use the land to mitigate wetlands they destroy in another area, the document says.

"This clearly would have an impact on our bidding strategy at the auction if we will be bidding against people with such interests," it says.

The residents also want to better understand the situation.

"The possible designation of the lakebed as wetlands could have a negative impact on our ability to build a dam and restore the lake," the document says.

Property owners met with a representative of Woodlake CC Corp. after the corporation made overtures about possibly transferring ownership of the dam and lake to the residents, but the talks broke down.

The corporation wanted the residents to drop the judgment, according to the document. The corporation rejected a counteroffer that included transfer of other property in Woodlake, the document says.

Part of the dam's spillway collapsed in October 2016 after torrential rain from Hurricane Matthew. State officials evacuated residents downstream over concern that the dam might fail.

The state breached the dam last year, leaving mostly empty a 1,200-acre lake that was once used for boating, swimming, fishing and water skiing. In May, a judge ordered Woodlake CC Corp. to pay the state \$1.14 million to cover the cost of breaching the structure.

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