

Editorial: Make Woodlake a New Municipality

The Pilot, 7 Oct 2018

Finally, the property owners at Woodlake Country Club appear to have arrived at the only possible solution for the long-term viability of their community: incorporation.

The gated golf club community off N.C. 690 and east of U.S. 1 has always been an unincorporated part of Moore County. There was talk over the years — 1992 and 2006 — about turning itself into a village or town. But that was all just water over the dam until there was no more water — or dam, for that matter.

The heart of Woodlake — the 1,200-acre picturesque Lake Surf — is today just a weedy, overgrown flat, soggy swamp interlaced with a couple of creeks. Property owners are about to mark two years without the lake, a victim of gross mismanagement and structural flaws that a foreign-based ownership group failed to fix over the years.

Hurricane Matthew in 2016 so compromised the dam and spillway, the state ordered the lake be drained. When German-owned Woodlake CC Corp. failed to comply with a judge's order to act, the state stepped in and breached the dam. The lake briefly reappeared last month after more than 16 inches of rain from Tropical Storm Florence fell, but it was water in, water out.

Property owners for years have dealt with unanswered and unaddressed issues at Woodlake, and the lake's demise is the last straw. Now they want self-governance, an idea whose time has come.

'Verge of Collapse'

This is not a knee-jerk response birthed in anger. Property owners have debated and weighed incorporation for more than 18 months. Woodlake, as a village and a formal subject of the state, would be Moore County's 12th municipality. With more than 1,200 residents, it would be the seventh largest incorporated communities, slightly larger than Robbins.

Incorporation gives Woodlake many opportunities, not the least of which is self-governance and the ability to right the wrongs. Chief among those abilities is the opportunity to borrow money to repair the dam and spillway at Lake Surf and return its lake to full pool.

John Cantwell is chairman of the Woodlake Incorporation Exploratory Committee. He said this effort at incorporation is not like twice before.

What has changed since then? Woodlake Corporation is on the verge of collapse, we have an empty lakebed, and we have a breached dam," Cantwell said. "If we don't exercise some measure of control, then others will determine our destiny for us."

The Best Solution

By “verge of collapse,” Cantwell means that the ownership group owes hundreds of thousands of dollars in back taxes to the county and unpaid bills to vendors. It also owes the state \$1.1 million for last year’s dam breach. And perhaps most important, it owes \$162 million to the Woodlake property owners who sued last year over their devastated property values and the community’s overall failed status. Woodlake CC Corp. didn’t even respond to the suit.

Woodlake property owners have asked the Moore County Board of Commissioners to step in and help them rectify the situation. While commissioners have been sympathetic, they have demurred on taking action.

Given that position, it seems the next best course of action, then, is incorporation. A “Village of Woodlake” would contract for police, fire and waste collection. It would have a mayor and five-member council. A village manager would be hired to oversee the day-to-day operations of the municipality.

It’s all a logical solution for what ails Woodlake. Another municipality in eastern Moore, working with its neighbor of Vass, can help guide growth in this region, enhance the county’s tax base, and resolve a long history of neglect and inequity.