

# Lawmaker Submits Proposal to Rebuild Woodlake Dam, Lake

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Residents of the embattled Woodlake community may finally have captured the attention of state lawmakers in their long story to repair their broken dam and restore their centerpiece lake.

State Sen. Tom McInnis has put forth a bill that would allow residents in the gated community east of Vass to hold a referendum to create a new taxing district.

McInnis, a Republican who represents Moore, Richmond, Scotland and Anson counties, introduced the bill last week. The creation of the proposed district, he said, could “generate the necessary funds to repair” Woodlake’s Lake Surf dam and allow the lake to be restored.

The dam, which was breached by the state Department of Environmental Quality in 2017, must be rebuilt before the empty lakebed can be refilled with water. Once the centerpiece of Woodlake, the 1,200-acre impoundment was drained after Hurricane Matthew weakened the dam in 2016 and jeopardized homes downstream.

“The most important part of this proposed legislation is the fact that the citizens outside of the Woodlake community would not be obligated for the debt that would be required to make this important repair to the dam possible,” McInnis said.

McInnis’ bill could set the stage for an arrangement similar to the one used to repair the Lake Ledbetter dam in Rockingham.

Under that arrangement, the Richmond County Board of Commissioners issued bonds to pay for the dam’s repair. The money was repaid by property owners through the creation of a special tax assessment district.

Woodlake residents have repeatedly pointed to the Lake Ledbetter dam as a potential model for rebuilding the dam at Lake Surf. So far, the Moore County Board of Commissioners has been unwilling to consider issuing bonds to pay for the project, which is expected to cost about \$9 million.

Efforts to rebuild the dam have been led by the Restore Woodlake Committee, the group that masterminded a successful class action lawsuit last year against Woodlake CC Corp., the company that owns the development. The lawsuit blamed Woodlake CC Corp. for causing property values to plummet in the country club by repeatedly failing to comply with the state’s orders to repair the deteriorated dam.

Superior Court Judge James Webb awarded the plaintiffs more than \$40 million in compensatory damages and more than \$121 million in punitive damages, but the committee has been unable to collect any money from the debt-plagued company.

Charlie Jones, a longtime Woodlake resident who serves as chairman of the committee, said McInnis did not contact the group before announcing the bill. Jones said he learned about the proposed legislation after reading a news release from the senator's office on Thursday.



*Charlie Jones, co-chair of the Restore Woodlake Committee, stands on a flooded road near the gated subdivision after Tropical Storm Florence. (Photograph by Jaymie Baxley/The Pilot)*

“(The bill) parallels what we had proposed to the commissioners some time ago,” Jones said. “It also parallels the solution that was pursued for the dam in Richmond County.”

It was not immediately known if duplicating the strategy used for the Lake Ledbetter dam would affect the committee's ability to collect on the class action judgement. Jones noted that the model used in Richmond County would require half the subdivision to vote in favor of creating a new taxing district, and those voters would need to represent at least 60 percent of the assessed property value in the proposed district.

“This won't be easy,” he said.

In a statement, McInnis said the bill “is the beginning of a long and complex transaction.” The success of the measure, he said, will depend on “the cooperation of the Woodlake community and the county commissioners.”

McInnis said he plans to enlist state Reps. Jamie Boles and Allen Ray McNeill, Moore County's two House members, to help push the bill forward.



*Aerial view of the Woodlake dam being demolished earlier this year*

“It is very important that this dam be repaired for several reasons, most notably the impact on future flood control and the real property tax values that have been significantly reduced due to the breach of the dam,” McInnis said.

Property values in Woodlake, which is home to about 2,000 people, fell sharply after the state Department of Environmental Quality drained Lake Surf and tore down the dam. Attorney General Josh Stein has vowed to hold Woodlake CC Corp. liable for the costs associated with the \$1 million demolition.

The subdivision has gone through multiple owners and two bankruptcies since it was founded as a lakefront leisure community in the 1970s. Several safety notices were issued by the state through the years in connection with the dam, but repairs were never made.

The removal of the dam is widely blamed for the extensive flooding experienced in communities downstream of Woodlake during Hurricane Florence. About 40 families in the Lobelia area were forced to abandon their waterlogged homes after the storm pummeled the Sandhills in September.

Some members of the Restore Woodlake Committee hope the N.C. General Assembly will enact legislation to make Woodlake the county’s 12th municipality. As a town, Woodlake would have taxing authority to pay for the dam.

Jones said he expects to discuss the bill with McInnis and Boles during an upcoming meeting of the Moore County Republican Men’s Club.