

Bill Kirby Jr.: ‘We’ve got to fix it,’ senator says about Woodlake dam in Moore County

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LOBELIA – Finally, John Misiaszek says, somebody is listening.

There was a time when Misiaszek was proud to call the gated Woodlake community in Moore County home, but recent years have been a nightmare for Misiaszek and every other homeowner who once found this such an enticing place with its picturesque setting.

“We moved to Woodlake in 2006,” Misiaszek says about he and his wife, Barbara. “What attracted us was the ambiance created by the lake. Also, I’m an avid golfer, so that was a significant added bonus. Woodlake did a great selling job on people, getting them to believe a membership on their house was critical to being able to one day sell their house.”

Today, the lake is drained, and all you see is barren stumps – a result of when Hurricane Matthew in 2016 weakened the dam that led to downstream flooding and threatened homes. The N.C. Department of Environmental Quality in 2017 emptied the centerpiece lake, and a new dam must be built before impounding again can occur.

The old Oates House clubhouse is shuttered, as per the Woodlake CC Corporation that also owns the dam and is facing legal judgments, and so is the original Ellis Maples-designed golf course, as well as the Arnold Palmer-designed course. All you see is vegetation, and Misiaszek will tell you property values have spiraled downward.

He says pleas for help to Moore County commissioners have fallen on deaf ears, although Catherine Graham, a past chairwoman of the commission board, was saying eight months ago she was empathetic to Woodlake residents and had contacted U.S. Rep. Richard Hudson about potential for federal assistance for dam repairs.

“I understand how frustrating this must be for Woodlake citizens,” she would say. “It is just not a simple fix.”

N.C. State Sen. Tom McInnis says as much, but ...

“We’ve got to fix it,” says McInnis, 64, who recently introduced a bill that could generate funds to repair the dam, restore the lake and potentially turn Woodlake into what once it was, and maybe more than anyone ever realized.

“A show pony,” he says.

McInnis’ legislation isn’t a proposal.

"It's in the hopper," says the Republican lawmaker who represents Moore, Richmond, Scotland and Anson counties.

A native of Richmond County, his Senate bill could lead to a blueprint of how commissioners in that county issued bonds for restoration of the Lake Ledbetter dam in Rockingham, whereby property owners paid for the restoration via a special tax assessment district.

"We had a similar circumstance at the Ledbetter Mill Dam," McInnis says. "So, the template is there. I believe it will work, but it's got a lot of moving parts."

Lake Ledbetter received notice from state dam safety inspectors in 2012 identifying maintenance issues that it said could result in failure during high-impact overflow and seismic events. Senate and House legislators overwhelmingly approved a bill to give Richmond County commissioners authority to repair the shuttered dam. The cost was divided among lakefront owners through property tax assessments.

Woodlake homeowners have asked Moore County commissioners to consider as much.

"If we can make this thing work, it would be a great thing," McInnis says. "Number one, we've got to get water back in that pond for a myriad of reasons" to include flood control along N.C. 690, an 11-mile stretch of roadway that leads to nearby Fort Bragg, where many military first responders must be ready within short notice of any emergency alert to duty anywhere around the globe.

And not to forget lost real property tax revenue for the Moore County coffers, thanks to the devalued Woodlake homes.

"It's a long and arduous road," McInnis says about rebuilding the dam. "I've heard from \$4 million to \$14 million, and I've heard \$8 million, which is more optimistic. It's not an incorporation, but where they would float a bond and pay for the work up front, and then repay the bonds of some agreed (-upon) formula."

And for it to potentially work, McInnis says, the majority of Woodlake residents have to be on board.

McInnis isn't alone in giving Woodlake homeowners an ear.

He says Rep. Jamie Boles and Rep. Allen McNeill, both Republicans representing Moore County, are offering companion bills.

"It's whichever gets through first," McInnis says, and passage of either bill will be the ticket.

McInnis, who lives in Ellerbe but owns a home in Pinehurst, knows Moore County like the back of his hand.

"I've done business there for 40 years and I remember going to Lake Surf when A.B. Hardee first developed it," he says about the late developer who opened Woodlake in 1968. "I'm a different kind

of senator. I'm a hands-on guy. I'm a problem solver. You see something wrong, you try to fix it. If there's a problem, you need to address it.

"This is the start of a long and complex transaction. Not the silver bullet, but one with many more in the chamber."

John Misiaszek says he would like to know how the county feels about the Senate and House bills in the General Assembly.

"Nobody in the media has yet got the commissioners on record as to what they think about this proposed legislation," he says. "Perhaps you could get a comment from Frank Quis, chairman of the Moore County Board of Commissioners, and Wayne Vest, the county manager."

Well, Mr. Misiaszek, I just recently found the photographs of Elvis Presley that went missing for almost 20 years when he performed in 1976 at the old Cumberland County Memorial Arena, and just last week located the old cupola that once towered over the old Fayetteville High School and Alexander Graham Junior High School along Robeson Street here in Fayetteville. And now I've got the County of Moore on the record about what it thinks of the Woodlake bills pending in Raleigh.

Friday: "Incorporation," county says, is the way

Columnist Bill Kirby Jr. can be reached at bkirby@fayobserver.com or 910-486-3571.