

Editorial: Finally, Someone To Help Woodlake

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The bed of Lake Surf remains boggy and overgrown. Amenities such as a historic old clubhouse and an Ellis Maples-designed golf course have fallen into disrepair.

But what's even more noticeable is the feeling of despair — or rather, the lack of it. Hope has returned to Woodlake, hope that the gated country club community that once boasted beautiful lakefront living and golf course leisure could someday return in some fashion.

After years of being subjected to foreign owners uninterested or unable to invest in proper maintenance and operation, the development is now under new — and more important — local ownership.

Fayetteville business and longtime Woodlake property owner Keith Allison bid \$3.5 million for the development during a foreclosure auction at the Moore County courthouse on Feb. 25. The county received no competing offers, and Allison took over a couple of weeks ago.

“The community seems to be excited about the change and — being part of the community — I'm excited as well,” said Allison, who is the president and CEO of Systel Business Equipment and a trustee at Methodist University in Fayetteville. “Different entities have worked hard over the last few years to make some progress, but they were stifled by the ownership, lack of financial resources and the liens on the property.

“It's hard to make progress when you've got millions of dollars in liens and foreign ownership that's not putting in money into the community.”

Sad State of Affairs

Woodlake, located off N.C. 690, could be Moore County's eastern jewel. Situated between U.S. 1 and Fort Bragg to the east, the development could be a massive draw for military families. It has long attracted a number of military retirees.

Woodlake once boasted a 1,200-acre lake — once the state's largest man-made lake — two golf courses, an old mansion for a clubhouse and other amenities. It was lake life and golf-front retirement living all rolled into one.

But since 1980, Woodlake has suffered under a string of German or Germany-based owners who seemed to care little for growing their real estate investment, much less keep up basic care of it.

The centerpiece of Woodlake was Lake Surf, and the development's most troubled asset over the years was a dam that the state began dinging for safety flaws and violations as far back as the late 1980s.

Bureaucratic threats came and went until, finally, Mother Nature took care of matters. Hurricane Matthew in 2016 led to torrential rains that almost ruptured the dam and threatened a downstream flooding event of almost biblical proportions. The state moved in, drained the lake, breached the dam, and the sorry state of affairs got a lot more sorry.

That's where things sat until 2019, when Allison took a controlling interest in the property. "My daughters learned to ski on the Woodlake lake," Allison said back then. "My family and I have a long-standing association and sentimental attachment to Woodlake."

Many Needs Ahead

Woodlake is now, essentially, Allison's problem. Can Woodlake be saved? Can it become that eastern jewel? It will take millions of dollars to fix the dam and restore the lake. There is legislation on the books that allows a special taxing district there to raise money for repairs, but county commissioners have yet to act on it.

And even if the dam can be addressed, other costly work remains: rehabilitating both golf courses, rebuilding lake docks, restoring the clubhouse, and repairing roads and other infrastructure. Getting water back in the lake is just a start.

Allison's daughter, Janene Aul, is the general counsel for Allison's Atlantic National Capital, which holds the investment in Woodlake. She said the plan is to work with the Woodlake Property Owners Association in the months ahead. Local ownership, she said, means that "progress can now be made much more easily."

Woodlake, finally, has the one thing it always needed most: an owner who cares about it.