

Morganton, N.C., Wednesday, August 19, 1998

22 pages

Copyright © 1998



Photo by Mark Hannan

Billy Luckadoo of Rutherford County fuels boat at Mountain Harbour Marina recently.

## Various lake use options debated At The Crossroads

By SABIAN WARREN  
News Herald Staff Writer

Lake James is good for business in Burke and McDowell counties, of that everyone agrees.

There are differences of opinion, however, about what kind of future economic benefits the lake could best produce.

Some say leaving the impoundment in its natural state is the best option because of its desirability as a tourist attraction.

Others say more housing construction along the shoreline would produce a bonanza of retail, commercial and tax revenue benefits for the two counties.

Tourism and recreation have been the primary focus so far.

"From a tourism perspective, it's almost vital to our county," said Sonja Branch, director of the Burke County Travel and Tourism Commission. "It's vital that they preserve as much of the natural beauty as they can."

That's one of the major reasons people say they like the lake.

According to Branch, the lake drew 424,948 visitors in 1997, up from 392,838 the year before.

"Every year it's gone up," she said. "The lake is a big draw for us. It's wonderful that we have that

resource."

Tourism is the second leading industry in the state, boosting sales for retail and commercial businesses, she said. Locally, Travel and Tourism Commission officials hope to contract for a study soon to put a dollar figure on the lake's tourism value.

"It's a clean industry. If you can mix a clean industry with a clean lake, that's a good combination," Branch said.

Left in its natural state, the lake has another economic value — as the set for big-time movie-making. The impoundment was the backdrop for parts of the movies "The Last of the Mohicans" and "The Hunt for Red October," bringing in millions to the local economy.

But with growth, a number of businesses around the lake, including boat dealers, stand to gain as housing construction and general use of the lake increases. Floyd Robinson, sales manager at Blackbeard's Boats in the Nebo community, said business is good, and is expected to get even better.

"We've seen a big pickup in traffic and a steady climb in boat sales and accessories," he said. "We're not going to get them all, but we're going to get some of them. We're not greedy. We just want our share."

But Robinson, a native of McDowell, admits to having some mixed feelings about all the new development at the lake.

"I think it's great they're opening

it up, but they need to make sure they don't ruin it," he said. "I think they need to leave some of the land undeveloped. If they develop it all, that cuts down on some of the drive-in people."

He added, "A lot of the people coming in here are from the outside.

The local people over the years have paid for the power. Duke Power needs to keep that in mind. There ought to be land set aside for people who don't live there and can't afford to live there."

Marina operators around the lake also had mixed feelings about the housing boom. Some, like Pat Scott, who has run Mountain Harbour Marina with her husband, Reid, for the past 15 years, said growth would be good for business, but worried about longtime customers getting pushed aside as wealthy newcomers take over the shoreline.

"For years we've had the same customers, but now we're seeing a lot of new faces," she said. "We're still going to be here, but a lot of our good customers won't."

Use of the lake has increased dramatically over the last decade, but if development proposals that are on the table are brought to fruition the next 10 years will be even more frenetic.

"It's going to be something to see," Scott said. "The boat traffic has increased a lot in 10 years. It's awesome how much it's increased."

She added, referring to the housing boom, "You know it's inevitable. It's Crescent's land

Please turn to Page