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This view of a new home site along Lake James illustrates the potential for soil runoff into lake.

Enforcing land-use rules difficult

By SABIAN WARREN
News Herald Staff Writer

One of the biggest threats to Lake James' water quality and aesthetic appeal isn't a lack of land-use regulations along the shoreline, it's a lack of enforcement of the rules that are already in place.

Though opinions on lake issues can vary greatly depending on the issue, public officials and conservationists up and down the Catawba River chain all agree on one thing: poor enforcement of zoning rules and watershed protection ordinances is a major problem facing the chain of lakes.

Specifically, rules calling for buffering between construction sites and waterways are the most frequently ignored regulations, officials say.

"Lack of enforcement of buffers is the biggest problem," said Donna Lisebny of Catawba Riverkeeper, a Charlotte-based environmental group that focuses on the Catawba River.

State-mandated watershed protection ordinances require that natural vegetative buffers be left in place anytime a shoreline is disturbed by development in order to serve as a filtering system to prevent sediment and other contaminants from entering a waterway. But anyone taking a boat ride around Lake James, or any other lake in the chain, can quickly find numerous violations. In many cases, land has been stripped bare to the edge of the

At The Crossroads Lake James

water.

"No one enforces the rules," said Lake Norman Marine Commission member Bob Elliott. "It's a big-time problem in Mecklenburg and the other counties. It's really tragic. Nobody gets fined and it never makes the paper, so nobody cares."

Officials in Burke and McDowell admit they can't keep up with what's happening at Lake James primarily because of a lack of adequate staffing.

"We've been short a staff member for five months," said Jim Owens, who heads Burke County's planning and zoning department. "We do as well as we possibly can with the situation like it is now.

There are so many other issues we have to deal with, not just Lake James. People call us about junked cars, lot-line issues, mobile homes and things like that."

McDowell County Manager Chuck Abernathy said his county is just now getting its feet wet in the area of land-use controls.

"We are fairly new to the whole area of land-use planning," he said, noting that zoning is probably more needed on the Burke side of the lake because of the greater development pressures there.

"It is an issue here," Abernathy said, "but it may be more of an issue in your county because of the amount of development on your

side."

In accordance with the state Watershed Protection Act of 1989, all North Carolina counties had to enact local watershed protection ordinances that included at least minimal rules regulating land development along waterways. The main thrust of the state legislation was protection of drinking water.

Many counties, including Burke, have since adopted additional zoning regulations that enhance watershed protection.

Burke and McDowell worked together in coming up with an ordinance for Lake James that would apply in both counties. Under the ordinance, lots must be at least a half-acre in size, and structures must be set at least 65 feet back from the water. For steep slopes, the setback is 75 feet.

The ordinance also requires a 50-foot-wide natural buffer and prohibits the cutting of trees unless they are replaced with comparable trees.

"If you cut down a six-inch diameter tree, you have to replace it with a tree of comparable size or with six one-inch diameter trees," Owens said.

Though penalties for violating the ordinance could include a fine of up to \$500 a day, no one is ever punished.

"We have a total of two people in the planning department to deal with infractions," Owens said.

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Bonnie bears down

By ALLEN BREED
Associated Press Writer

WILMINGTON — Tropical-force winds and rain from Hurricane Bonnie blustered into southeastern North Carolina today, with the rest of the 400-mile-wide storm expected to follow by midday.

Rain and winds gusting to 60 mph buffeted Wrightsville Beach outside Wilmington this morning. Doug Hoehler, a National Weather Service forecaster in Wilmington, said forecasters believe the storm would reach the mouth of the Cape Fear River south of Wilmington between noon and 2 p.m. today.

The last major storm to come ashore in the Wilmington area was Hurricane Fran in September 1996. It plowed through the middle of the state, causing \$5.2 billion in damages and 24 deaths.

This time, however, forecasters believed Bonnie would veer to the northeast and follow the North Carolina coastline toward Virginia.

More than 500,000 people were ordered off North Carolina's coastal islands and out of South Carolina's two northernmost coastal counties Tuesday.

The weather service reported the hurricane's location at 110 miles south of Wilmington at 8 a.m. headed north-northwest at 14 mph. Tropical force winds — 39 mph to 73 mph — radiated 230 miles from the storm's center and already were being reported in the Wilmington area, the weather service reported.

Hurricane warnings were posted from Edisto Beach, S.C., north to Chincoteague, Va. They include Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds and Chesapeake Bay from Smith Point southward.

Hundreds of residents and tourists awaited the storm in shelters in 24 North Carolina counties, but others took no chances and migrated farther inland. I Greenville, 80 miles west of North Carolina's Outer Banks, almost every motel room was taken.

Gov. Jim Hunt signed a proclamation declaring a state of emergency Tuesday, while military pilots shuttled warplanes out of Pope and Seymour Johnson Air Force bases in anticipation of Bonnie's arrival.

High wind warnings and watches, and a flashflood watch were posted for the eastern half of North Carolina through tonight. Many eastern North Carolina schools are businesses closed today.

As winds picked up Wrightsville Beach outside Wilmington today, police used