

Public area

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On Lake Rhodhiss, tracts of 127, 2 and 2 acres are available.

The county has the option of leasing all of the property listed on both lakes, but for practical reasons only one site would likely be chosen, George said.

Under terms of the program, any property that is leased must be used for public recreational purposes. In applying for the use of property, the county would have to submit a detailed plan for how the land would be utilized and what facilities built.

If a county chooses not to participate in the program, Duke would then seek to lease the identified sites to commercial operators, who would also be required to develop the tracts for public recreational use.

George said he'll spend the next several weeks getting more information about the program, then submit a report to county commissioners. The county board will ultimately decide whether to involve Burke in the program.

"From all indications, I think the board is certainly interested in looking at it," George said.

Local officials have until Dec. 31 to indicate to Duke whether the county wants to participate, George said.

Public access has become an issue, particularly on Lake James, as wealthy newcomers buy up the shoreline, making the forested banks off limits to families that have used the lake for generations. Many longtime residents of the area are upset over the changes at the lake.

"Development pressure on the lakes is only going to get greater as time goes on," George said. "When you look at the development on Lake Norman, you'd like to think you could learn from what was done there and not make the same mistakes."

The new program was started to enhance public access on lakes all along the Duke system, according to information provided to the county. Duke is obligated to provide access under the company's licensing agreement with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The Lake Access Area Improvement Initiative is unrelated to land conservation efforts under way at Lake James in which local and state officials are seeking to purchase hundreds of acres along the shoreline from Crescent Resources, a Duke subsidiary, for the expansion of Lake James State Park.

Duke Energy officials couldn't be reached for comment.

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