

Lack of freedom with Lake Gilmer development frustrates Gilmer officials

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A home with undeveloped shoreline is seen Saturday at Lake Gilmer. Rules regulating the lake property are frustrating officials who say homeowners can't install piers or docks.

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GILMER — A \$20 million investment by the Upshur County seat built Lake Gilmer with the twin goals of economic development and capturing water in an era of drought.

Seventeen years later, local stakeholders are frustrated, and homeowners struggle with restrictions that prevent them from making shoreline improvements such as docks and piers.

That was the consensus that emerged this past week when about 50 business owners and economic development and elected officials met to exchange what they know — and don't know — and to consider ways to fulfill the lake's initial promise.

Originally named Kelsey Creek Reservoir after the water body that feeds it, Lake Gilmer opened to the public Sept. 29, 2001.

Some homes have been built, and two nature trails have been blazed — but not much has happened otherwise.

The group that gathered in the Upshur Rural Electric Cooperative auditorium Wednesday blamed much of that on restrictions in the permit related to mitigation acres.

Mitigation land is set aside in equal proportion to the footprint of a proposed lake, the philosophy being to preserve as much pristine land as a lake will eliminate.

There are 1,557 mitigation acres for the 1,010-acre Lake Gilmer, most of that to its northwest.

But the mitigation area also encircles the reservoir.

Gilmer Councilman Jarom Tefteller said that restriction extends vertically seven feet. That's as much shoreline as it takes to stand 7 feet above the lake's surface and is typically far from shore.

"That's why nobody has done a lot of development at the lake," Tefteller said. "Because you can't do anything on the shore. You can build a house and stare at the lake."

The reservoir, 4 miles west of downtown on FM 852, is outside the Gilmer city limits, so any property tax revenue goes to the county and Gilmer ISD.

Meanwhile, lake debt swallows 85 percent of the sales tax its namesake city is allowed to channel to economic development, City Manager Greg Hutson told the group.

That's a problem, state Rep. Jay Dean replied.

"The entire tax that you're receiving for economic development is going to pay off the lake," said Dean, R-Longview, who represents Upshur and Gregg counties. "It isn't bringing a whole lot back to the community at this point, and it could be. ... I think Lake Gilmer offers an excellent opportunity for us to use as an (attraction)."

Debt on the Texas Water Development Board loan that built the lake is down to \$4.521 million, if carried to its maturity in 2034, Tefteller said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit granting impoundment of Ellison Creek, however, appears to be one of the most restrictive in the region if not the state.

It contrasts dramatically with the older Lake O' the Pines, a Corps of Engineers reservoir lined with docks, public beaches and other development.

"You can't hunt on it, you can't graze it, you can't harvest the timber," Gilmer banker and businessman Steve Dean said.

Tefteller, who is not a property owner at the lake, said residents can't even mow at shoreline "so your kids can fish without getting bit by water moccasins."

And while the reservoir was built partly as a potable water source, Gilmer remains entirely reliant on well water and has yet to tap the lake.

"A community cannot be healthy if all of your eggs are in one basket," said Walt Sears, manager of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District that delivers Lake O' the Pines water to Longview and seven area cities. "The city of Longview understands that. That's why it has three sources of water."

In addition to Lake O' the Pines, Longview draws water from Lake Cherokee and the Sabine River.

"When you're talking about a modest amount of water, it's most precious to Gilmer and Upshur County," Sears said.

Lake Gilmer holds 12,720 acre feet of water, or 4.1 trillion gallons.

Its "firm yield," the amount it can release annually for municipal, agricultural, commercial and other uses, is 6,180 acre feet, slightly more than 2 trillion gallons.

“There is a need to establish a framework for guiding actions,” Tony Smith, a consultant for the 18-county Region D Water Planning Group, told the gathering. “What goals do you have for your water, for water developed, in the future? What do you want to preserve? What do you want to achieve that you can’t have today? What do you want to avoid?”

Discussion briefly turned to the revenue that sellable water could provide Gilmer, with Sears strongly recommending the amount was more amenable as a supplement to the city’s wells.

But no one knew if the permit will allow a pipeline to be buried beneath the mitigation land.

“We’re going to have to have land available for a pipeline,” Steve Dean said, after noting that Gilmer ISD owns 146 acres bordering the lake mitigation land.

Rep. Dean recommended getting a copy of the Corps permit and devising amendments to make the lake more user friendly.

So did Smith, the consultant.

“You’re incredibly fortunate that the leaders for Gilmer, 20 or 30 years ago, developed a surface water permit for Gilmer,” Smith said, later adding, “But Lake Gilmer is just sitting there.”

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Smith’s two-part recommendation was for the stakeholders to agree on exactly what they hope to do with their water and seek amendments to the permit to allow that.

Dean agreed.

“What’s hamstringing Gilmer is that lake is just so limited it’s not attractive,” he said.

Tefteller later said the city needs to examine its lake permit.

“I don’t know that the permit’s been reviewed by anybody to tell what you can and can’t do,” the councilman said.