



CHEROKEE COUNTY COMMISSION

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J. Kirk Day, Chairman
Tim Burgess, Administrator
Randy L. Jones, Dist. 1

REGULAR MEETING 2ND & 4TH MONDAY
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Kimball Parker, Dist 2
Marcie L. Foster, Dist. 3
Carlton "Bubba" Teague, Dist. 4



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COUNTY COMMISSION TO EXPLORE POSSIBLE COUNTY PARK ON WEISS LAKE

Centre, AL, July 28, 2014 - In response to renewed public interest in establishing a county park on Weiss Lake, the Cherokee County Commission is looking into the feasibility of such a project.

A local businessman, Jerry Culberson, recently asked the commission to look into establishing such a park along Alabama State Highway 9 between Centre and Cedar Bluff using the existing facilities present at the public boat ramp located on the western side of the causeway. On June 19, 2014, representatives from the Commission and the Cherokee County Highway Department met with engineers from the Alabama Department of Transportation's (ALDOT) First Division office to discuss what improvements the state would require to Highway 9 given the increased traffic that an expanded recreational facility would bring to the narrow causeway. The State would require turn lanes, additional guard rails, and signage. The addition of the turn lanes would further require that the causeway be widened three additional feet on each side. Cost estimates for completing the aforementioned improvements were found to be in excess of \$350,000. Furthermore, all of the proposed site's 1.89 acres is located within Alabama Power's flood easement.

It is the position of the Cherokee County Commission that a park located along the causeway between Centre and Cedar Bluff would not be a feasible project to pursue given the high cost and the limited size of the area. Commission Chairman Kirk Day stated, "The Commission feels that we would have to spend a whole lot of the public's money and still not give the public what they were wanting in terms of a public recreational area on the lake." Despite this outcome, the Commission still thinks that the idea of a county park along the shores of Weiss Lake is worth exploring. "Mr. Culberson's proposal wasn't without merit," Day said. He went on to add that, "I think he is correct that there is a need for some type of public recreational facility which could give both visitors and residents access to Weiss Lake."

When looking for alternative locations for a county park on the lake, the Commission felt that it is important that the site be near a major highway and that it be large enough to be developed into a multiuse facility. A multiuse facility could be used for a host of activities such as fishing, boating, swimming, camping, environmental education, etc. A location which might meet the Commission's criteria is the area near the old public boat ramp located at the end of County Road 520 in the Bay Springs area. This is a 200-acre property owned by Alabama Power and is near US Highway 411 between Centre and Leesburg. When the Commission contacted Alabama Power's Shoreline Management Office in Centre about the possibility of the county acquiring or leasing the property for development as a park, their response was encouraging. Representatives from the local Shoreline Management Office informed the Commission that Alabama Power is always looking to open up more recreational opportunities for the public on the lakes that the company manages. They stressed, however, that any decision on such a development would have to be approved by Alabama Power's home office, but they felt the company would be open to discussions concerning the project.

The Crappie Capitol of the World - 33,000 Acres of Water Wonderland

The Commission is therefore forming an exploratory committee to look into the feasibility of developing a recreational area in Bay Springs. This committee will consist of the District 2 Commissioner, Commissioner Kimball Parker; the District 3 Commissioner, Commissioner Marcie Foster; and a representative from the Parks and Recreation Board, Jeff Wolfe. Additionally, two advisory members will serve to help the committee gather information: County Engineer Corey Chambers, and the Team Leader of the local Alabama Power Shoreline Management Office, Dennis Trammell. Commissioner Parker will chair the committee as the proposed location is in his district. On behalf of the Commission, the committee will first look into whether Alabama Power would allow the development of the recreational area on their property. If Alabama Power is willing, then the committee will look into the cost of constructing direct access from US Highway 411 to the proposed site. "I think that is an important aspect of any potential development in the Bay Springs area," Chairman Day said and then added, "Currently, to get to the site, you have to go through residential areas whose roads are not designed to handle the increased traffic that would come should this project become a reality. There must be direct access to the site from the highway."

If the above conditions can be met, then the committee will go about developing a master plan for the usage of the site. Naturally, the Commission will be actively seeking input from the public at this stage. A master plan is often a requirement when seeking funding from either public or private sources. An important function of the committee will be to explore partnership opportunities in development of a park with the State as well as with Alabama Power; and to look into funding opportunities through grants and other programs. Developing a park along Weiss Lake would certainly be a costly undertaking, but the direct cost to the county could be reduced if funding is secured from these other sources.

Chairman Day stressed that the priority of the Commission remains to put Cherokee County on a firm financial footing and that the Commission will not take on the cost of creating an additional park at the expense of keeping the county's budget in good shape. "Currently, we still have the matter of the \$1.5 million debt being carried by the county due to our jail," said Day. "This is the biggest obstacle to our ability to develop projects such as this and we must deal with it now." Day added that the priority of the Parks and Recreation Board is to get the improvements at Cherokee Rock Village finished before taking on any additional projects. "All of us on the Commission want to provide more recreation opportunities for our residents and visitors, but we have to operate within our means," the chairman said. "Right now, the Commission is taking a closer look to see if a park on Weiss Lake is even a possibility and, if so, what would be the cost to the county. When we get those questions answered, we can make an informed decision on how best to proceed."

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