

Lake Conestee seen as scenic wetland

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Group wants to turn silted body of water into beauty spot for public

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A thin layer of green algae, dotted by pieces of trash washed down the Reedy River, collects on the banks of Lake Conestee, a body of water just south of Greenville.

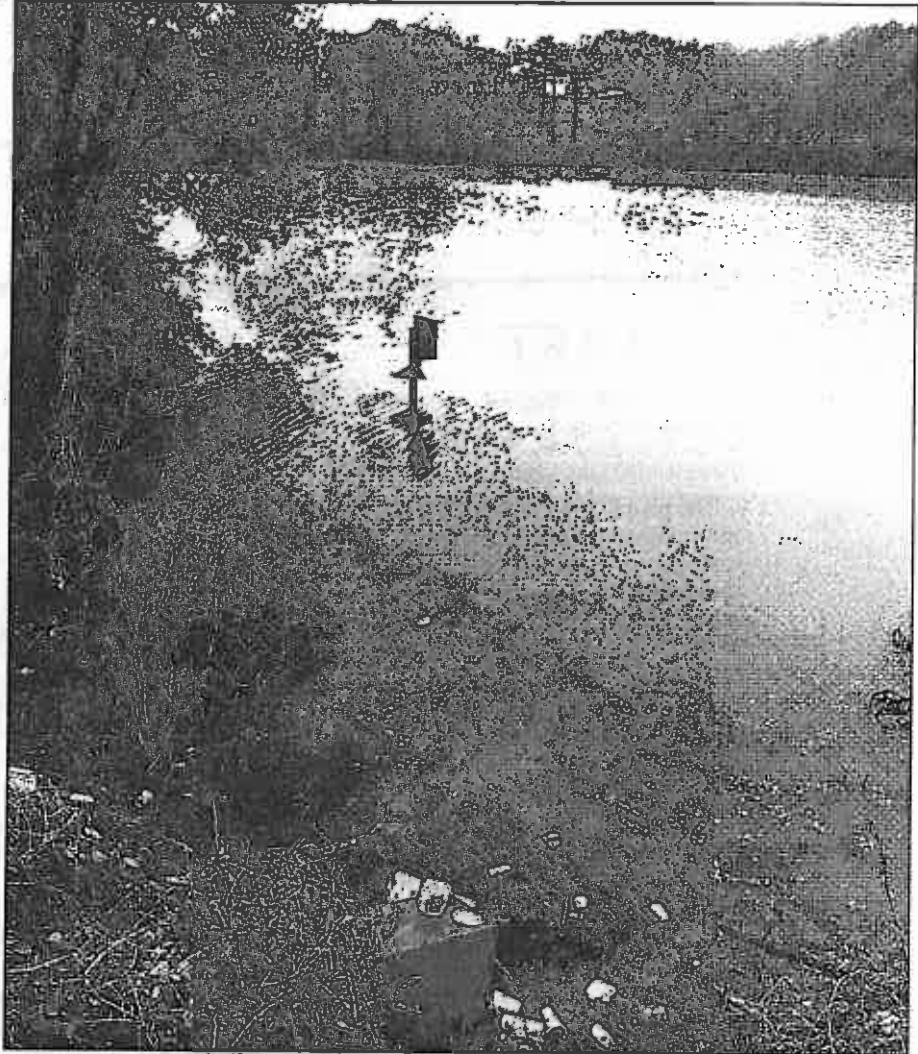
Misty Roach, 30, has lived all her life by the lake with the purple wisteria hanging from the trees. Some people swim in it, but she wouldn't dare. She likes the idea of an effort under way to clean it up, but said many in the community have mixed feelings.

Their concern is, if the lake is turned into a scenic attraction, it might draw developers who will want to bulldoze their neighborhood and put up expensive housing.

"People are tired of it looking in bad shape, but are worried what could happen," she said. "I think it should be cleaned up."

That might happen soon if the funding comes through.

The Conestee Foundation, which is made up of individuals from the community, was established in 1999 and purchased the entire lake as well as 112 adjoining acres with the hope of turning it into an environmental center. There are no plans to



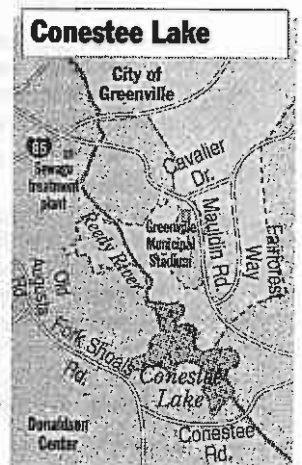
JASON PARKER / Staff

Unclean waters: Groups are seeking funding to clean up Lake Conestee, formed by a dam on the Reedy River.



JASON PARKER / Staff

Mixed feelings: Misty Roach, a longtime Lake Conestee resident, likes the idea of revitalizing the lake, but others fear it will attract too much development.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

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make it a full lake again.

The plan is to turn the polluted and little-used lake into a public resource for green space, school field trips, hiking and wildlife habitat, said David L. Hargett, a technical advisor to the Conestee Foundation.

To raise money, the foundation recruited the Clemson Environmental Institute to seek federal funds, Hargett said. So far, support for the project has been pledged by the cities of Greenville and Mauldin; the counties of Greenville, Greenwood and Laurens; the environmental group *Upstate Forever*; and the Greenville County School District, among others.

Funding has been tough. The master plan had been included in the "Penny for Parks" proposal voted down last fall by Greenville residents.

The plan calls for \$6 million in watershed and public water supply protection, and creation of an education program.

According to historians, Cherokee Indians called the strip of land off Mauldin and Conestee roads just south of Municipal Stadium limits the "Land of Beautiful Waters." However, by 1812 a wooden dam was built across the Reedy, creating the 150-acre lake to provide water power for a nearby foundry.

The present concrete dam was created in the 1820s. A 30-foot

cascade of brown water still flows over its walls. Chain-link fences prevent people from getting too close, and holes cut in the fences have been thatched with barbed wire.

The dam was rebuilt in 1926 and the mill village around the site flourished, Hargett said. However, Greenville's industrial growth in a time when there were no erosion and sediment control regulations dumped many thousands of tons of silt into Lake Conestee.

The lake was once 145 acres with two named islands, but because of the silt it is now less than 20 acres, he said. In 1988, there was so little water and oxygen left that fish died.

Studies confirmed the presence of thousands of industrial compounds in the lake.

"It is a misnomer to call it a lake. The reality is it is presently 98 percent silted in. It is now maybe 20 acres of water. It is really a big wetland," Hargett said. "The safest and most cost-effective thing to do is leave the sediment where it's at."

Norris McDonald, president of the African-American Environmentalist Association in Maryland, said because of the amount of chemicals in the sediment, it is best to keep the area a wetland. He points to a \$14 million project for a Washington lake where dredging occurred.

"I have mixed opinions on that project because it could become a breeding ground for West Nile virus," McDonald said.

Dana Leavitt, Conestee Foun-

dation president, said the sediment buildup has been a blessing in disguise because it prevented the waste from flowing downstream into drinking water in Greenwood and helped turn the lake into a wetland with beavers, otters and a number of bird species.

"As soon as I saw the Lake Conestee area, I knew," he said. "It is such a gorgeous place and so rich and teeming with wildlife. It is so close to greater Greenville, but it has been blighted and abused and abandoned."

"Our objective is to not drain it and dredge it and rebuild it like it was 100 years ago," Leavitt said. "Our objective is to monitor the sediment and build managed wetlands."

The group wants to revitalize the entire area, including the former mill village and the mobile home community on the shoreline, but not displace the people, he said.

"Conestee has caught the brunt of anything bad that has happened in Greenville," Leavitt said. "We have always looked at a 10- to 20-year project. It will continue to emerge as a fantastic opportunity for Greenville. The unknown is how it will happen."