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jgill@gainesvilletimes.com

Lake group may cut back on goals with higher lake level and slipping donations

BUFORD — The future of 1071 Coalition, a Lake Lanier advocacy group, is unclear after the group releases its long-awaited economic impact study this spring.

“We’ll stay in business, so to speak, but we’re not going to have the funding to accomplish any of the other goals we had set out to do,” said Alex Laidlaw, the group’s chairman.

Slipping donations, partially caused by the weakened economy, have taken their toll on the group’s budget.

The group had aimed “to create a scientific-based study in terms of what those flows (from Lake Lanier) should be and a (public relations) campaign,” Laidlaw said, speaking after a Tuesday morning presentation at Lake Lanier Islands’ Legacy Lodge and Conference Center.

“We may have some money to do a little PR,” he added.

Laidlaw said he expects the group “will stay engaged, just not (be) as active as we have been.”

A perked-up economy could help revive the group, however.

“It’ll be interesting to see what happens this year. I think the 2010 summer is going to be an interesting (season),” Laidlaw said.

The 1071 Coalition formed in December 2008 — in the midst of a staggering two-year drought — with the goal of ensuring that management practices keep Lanier full.

The lake’s winter full pool is 1,070 feet above sea level, but recent rainy weather has prevented the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from reaching that level. The lake stood at 1,070.96 feet Tuesday afternoon.

The 1071 Coalition began with a \$700,000 budget, including \$200,000 for a study determining Lake Lanier’s impact on the region, but “I will tell you some things have changed since then,” Laidlaw told an audience gathered at the resort Tuesday.

He addressed a meeting of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce’s South Hall Business Coalition.

Showing sharply contrasting drought and post-drought photographs to the audience, Laidlaw described the higher lake levels, produced by record rains, as “a good news-bad thing” for the 1071 Coalition.

“Obviously, we want these levels to be maintained ... but is it a game-changer for us as a coalition? I certainly think so,” he said.

“We got a lot of support when we initiated the coalition. There was a lot of momentum, but as we’ve gotten these full lake levels, we’ve really seen the attention drop and the funding drop.”

A failing economy hasn’t helped the organization’s cause, he added.

The group has put its focus squarely on the economic study, which is set to be released in the next few months.

The coalition has released some preliminary results, primarily that the number of May-September, or in-season, visitors to the Lake Lanier area dropped from 5 million in 2007 to 4.2 million in 2008.

Atlanta-based Bleakly Advisory Group is conducting the study.

“What we’re trying to demonstrate is you’ve got one impact at 1,071 (feet above sea level) and, as you go down from there, what are the negative impacts and what do those dollars represent when you get down to 1,050 or 1,051,” he said.

The lake was at its lowest level ever, 1,050.79 feet, on Dec. 26, 2007.

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