

Jasper County Won't Support Bear Creek Reservoir without referendum 8.14.12

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Jasper BOC won't support Bear Creek Reservoir without referendum

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COVINGTON - The Jasper County Board of Commissioners has unanimously agreed that it will not enter into an agreement with any county or authority regarding Bear Creek Reservoir without holding a referendum and getting voter approval.

Jasper County District 4 Commissioner Mary Patrick made the motion at a recent BOC meeting after the news that Newton County has received a \$21 million loan to construct the reservoir through the Governor's Water Supply Program.

"I'm concerned that Jasper County will again be roped into this," Patrick said. The discussion has been posted on YouTube and Patrick has sent an email to constituents regarding the issue.

In an interview Tuesday, Patrick said that in 2003, the Jasper County Board of Commissioners was ready to sign a deal with Newton County that would have committed Jasper to funding 25 percent of the reservoir costs. Patrick said that Jasper citizens were not informed of those discussions, and due to public outcry and an attempt to get an injunction to stop the agreement, a judge ordered a public meeting, a citizens' committee was appointed and new representatives were elected to the BOC that opposed Bear Creek.

"In 2003 the Board of Commissioners had several illegal meetings and almost voted to get us tied in to Bear Creek Reservoir, which if we had done that, the reservoir still doesn't exist today, we would have been millions of dollars out of pocket for Jasper County with nothing to show for it ... I'm very concerned this might again occur," Patrick said.

The makeup of the Jasper board will change the first of next year, as Patrick is not running for re-election, one current member lost a bid for re-election and others face competition in November.

Patrick said she wanted to bring the issue up now so that, "In order to make a future agreement, the BOC would have to either hold a referendum or overturn this vote that was passed 5-0."

Patrick said she doubts the cost estimate of \$62.7 million to construct Bear Creek Reservoir. "I feel certain it will cost four times that figure, as have many of the reservoirs that (Newton County Attorney) Tommy Craig has been involved in," she said in her letter to constituents. "This \$62 million must not cover all the land that has already been acquired, or the pipeline of 16+ miles running from BCR to Cornish Creek Reservoir to treat the water, nor the pipe from BCR to the Alcovy River to pump water into the reservoir. How many more millions of dollars will that cost? The public is never informed of the true cost, and the cost is just added to their tax bill year after year."

A press release issued by the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority gave the cost of Bear Creek Reservoir at \$62,685,831. According to County Manager John Middleton, the \$21 million loan will fund the first phase, construction of the dam and reservoir. The other phases -- construction of the pump station and water treatment plant -- will account for the remainder of the cost, he said. The 1,242 acre pumped-storage reservoir will have a water intake on the Alcovy River. The reservoir is being designed to yield 28 million gallons per day.

The county will pay zero interest for the first three years of construction, 1 percent for the remainder of construction, accrued and capitalized, and 1.82 percent during the repayment period once construction is complete. The county will make interest-only payments the first seven years of the 40-year loan and will pay principal and interest afterward and will not be charged a closing fee.

Middleton said that his understanding is that the permit will be issued this fall, as indicated by the state and federal agencies handling the permitting process. Once permitted and the dam design is completed and approved by Georgia Safe Dams, construction could begin in late 2013 to early 2014, Middleton said, take about 24 months to complete and, depending on natural rainfall, a year or so to fill.