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Low White Lake Level Not Hurting Business

By TIM PITTMAN
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WHITE LAKE — Bladen County's popular inland resort still suffers from the low-water blues — White Lake is nearly 13 inches below full stage — but motel owners say the low lake level has not hurt the tourist trade.

Six months ago, dire predictions could be heard from property owners and businessmen who feared a drop in the lake level would trigger a subsequent drop in paying customers.

The crystal-clear lake, filling 1,000 acres, had dropped to 17 inches below normal in December. North Carolina experienced its driest winter in years. There were warnings of bad times for the vacation season.

But the most dire predictions have not come true. Some merchants report mid-week slumps and slightly smaller crowds, but a majority of the resort businesses appear to be enjoying a bustling — if not record-setting tourist season.

Declining water levels have left more beach for lakefront property owners. White Lake has receded almost six feet from the shoreline of the 1980 summer season, leaving a brown-colored ring of sand between the water and the beach.

Boaters are discovering the difficulties of getting in and out of the lake in shallow water.

And many piers that once reached to deep water are now difficult to dive from safely.

But life at White Lake is much like any other summer, merchants say. They blame mid-week slumps on gasoline prices — not the low lake level.

David Cross, owner of White Lake Marina and a man who publicly expressed his concern about the low water during meetings in the winter, says his fears were unfounded.

"The lake is still low," Cross says. "It's harder on the boats, but that hasn't stopped anybody from coming."

"I was worried last year. But it hasn't seemed to matter."

With his weekend boating business running as strong as ever, Cross says he is not worried about the future of the lake. "In July we always lose another inch," Cross explains. "Evaporation will take some away during the summer. But I think it's staying about the same right now. As long as it holds its own, the lake will come back."

Keith Langston, proprietor of Langston Motel and Cottages, sees a trend to shorter vacations. "It's not a matter of less people coming," Langston says. "We've probably got more people coming. But they leave sooner. They don't spend as much money."

A veteran of more than 25 years in the White Lake motel business, Langston and family don't worry about the water level.

"I've never been worried. It may be down for a while but it was lower in the early 1950s. The lake is not going to be hurt by one dry season," Langston says.

On a Thursday afternoon last week, the arcades and public beaches were busy if not crowded. At Goldston Beach, where a lakefront remodeling project has just been completed, owner Harry Womble describes a thriving summer.

"Our motel business has been as good this year as before," Womble



Staff photo — DICK BLOUNT

Weekend tourists crowd the shore and pier at Goldston Beach at White Lake Saturday

says. "I can't really tell you if the low water level has hurt businesses."

"The Fourth (July 4th weekend) was off a little, but we had rain and cool weather. If the business is off around here, I suspect it's related more to gasoline prices than the water level," Womble says.

The earliest signs of White Lake's year-long drop were visible about 12 months ago. H.L. Woodell, superintendent of Singletary Lake Group Camp and State Lakes, has kept a close watch on White Lake's progress from a gauge at the state-owned pier.

His records show the lake rose in late May by nearly three inches. Since that month, the lake has remained at about an even level, slipping in early July as evaporation began to take its annual summer toll.

"The state hydrologists seem to think this drop in water level is related to the low water tables across the state," Woodell says.

White Lake Mayor Annie Lee Smith, a fervent defender of the resort

and its tourist-based economy, dismisses the idea that the lake level has hurt the summer tourist business.

"If business is off here — and I don't think it's off too much — then it has been caused by the economy and gasoline prices," Mrs. Smith says.

"People are still coming to White Lake in the summer."

Mrs. Smith, like most of the permanent residents of White Lake, is not worried about the lake itself.

The mayor's refrain, similar to most motel owners and business people, rings with an upbeat tone about the lake.

The two weeks before and after the July 4th weekend have been typically busy weeks, the motel and restaurant operators said.

Looking ahead to Labor Day, and the no-vacancy nights in between, White Lake merchants are shattering the notion that the low water level would hurt the tourist business.