

# Engineers stick by their opinion that lower water did not cause bulkhead failures



Heavy equipment operators work on constructing a berm that will become an island at the south end of False River, an important phase of the lake restoration project.

by Tommy Comeaux

Despite arguments presented at a recent meeting hosted by the False River Civic Association, engineers involved with the lake's restoration project believe the drawdown is not responsible for the failure of some lakeside residents' bulkheads.

They said a multitude of other

reasons are likely to be found to be at the root of the failure those bulkheads that have collapsed or caved in during the meeting and in telephone interviews afterward.

False River's water level has been lowered from its normal 16 feet to about 13.5, a figure arrived at because of a natural phenomenon that lowered it to that level in 2000 and considered safe because

no significant damage occurred then.

One of the factors engineers on hand cited for being responsible for the failure of some bulkheads was age—bulkheads constructed prior to 2000 are 15 years older today.

Other issues that could be causing bulkheads along the lakefront

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to collapse are poor construction, the lack of weep holes, or borings in the wall to allow water seepage to drain into the lake, and the scouring of the base of bulkheads from wave action, the engineers said.

"The drawdown did not cause the failures," said Chris Knotts, an engineer with two bachelor's degrees from LSU and a master's from the University of Texas-Arlington with over 30 years experience. "The drawdown exposed existing deficiencies with the bulkheads."

His quote was not well received by those at the meeting whose bulkheads have failed.

About 15 property owners have reported bulkhead failures or problems since the drawdown began, well less than 2 percent of the 800 or so that line False River.

"The water level is the problem," said Troy LeBlanc, who said he did not believe differences in the soil on different properties caused some bulkheads to fail and others to continue holding and accused the engineers of "trying to talk over our heads."

"Your soil may all look the same but I guarantee you there are differences," Knotts said.

State Rep. Major Thibaut said he believed most people at the meeting Jan 28 "were going to be

satisfied with what the engineers' responses were" and would understand the problems with some bulkheads were due to "existing shortcomings."

He said while there were probably 20 people who picked up forms offered at the meeting by Professional Engineering Corp. (PEC) to report bulkhead problems, only three have come by his office since then.

"I want a report on what happened to my bulkhead so that I know when I rebuilding I know what to improve, what to change, when I rebuild," he said two of the three told him.

Thibaut said "all bulkheads have a lifespan," then added he knows that "every year some get patched, fixed or rebuilt. There's a failure rate of bulkheads every year."

Gerald Babin, president of PEC, the firm overseeing the lake restoration project, said he has examined about 10 properties with bulkhead issues, adding "each instance is unique."

He said those who have had problems should fill out the forms he provided to assist him with analyzing what issue their bulkhead may have.

"There's a lot of information about your bulkhead that I may not have that would help," Babin

said, adding the bulkheads he's examined have ranged "from a little bit to a good deal of damage" and that PEC would look at and evaluate each problem reported.

One problem that seems to be prevalent with bulkheads that have failed is that there is not enough of the bulkhead embedded in the lake bottom, Knotts said.

"If it sticks up out of the water, it needs to be two thirds embedded and one third exposed," he said. "That will last. That will work."

Thibaut addressed concerns voiced by some at the meeting that the dredging is not going to do any good without the canals that drain into the lake being altered with weirs and other methods that will keep additional silt from getting into False River.

He said there is no dredging going on presently, only the construction of a wall to contain silt to form an island when the dredging begins. Thibaut said that is being funded with state monies already in hand.

Funds that have been provided by NRG are dedicated to building the weirs and baffles to restrict the flow of silt into the lake, the source of the multitude of problems False River faces today, Thibaut said.

He said the studies of the one of the canals is completed and the other underway and applica-

tions have been submitted to the U.S. Corps of Engineers for those aspects of the project. Work on the M-1 canal at the south end of the lake is expected to begin before the end of the year.

"This project and coming to hear about your problems is important to us, to the engineers and to the governmental agencies involved," Thibaut continued. "It took us a long time to get started and we've got a really good thing going."

"We can't keep it going if we don't have the cooperation of the people," he said.

Thibaut said the project will take several years, but the water level of False River will begin to be allowed to rise again after Mar. 1.

"This project is about improving the lake," he said. "It's about removing silt and making sure the lake is here for the future."

The problem with bulkheads failing is one the False River Civic Association has expressed concerns with since the drawdown was first announced.

"I personally have doubts that it will achieve much good in terms of habitat restoration," Rudi Schnur, a retired engineer, said in a letter to the Corps of Engineers in 2010, adding he based his argument on studies done of a lake with similar problems in New Zealand.

"And it will of course not remove any of the silt," he continued. "What I am, however, most concerned about is that such a drawdown might very well cause wholesale bulkhead failures and soil subsidence, followed by foundation and structural failures."

Schnur cited two other reports—one at a development on the north end of the lake and another in St. Landry Parish—that indicated "that the sea wall will fail if the water level would be lower for longer periods of time."

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