

# Citizen Times

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## The lake is closed for the season. But town of Lake Lure is ready for visitors to return.



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### Key Points

The town of Lake Lure, known for its pristine 800-acre lake and located in Hickory Nut Gorge, was hit hard by Tropical Storm Helene in September.

The lake is closed for the season, but the town is open and ready for visitors to return, officials say.

Meanwhile, subsurface debris removal is underway, a key step toward reopening the lake.

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**LAKE LURE** - Once a stagecoach stop, the historic property of Pine Gables has provided visitor lodging for more than 200 years. It overlooks Lake Lure, an 800-acre lake fed by the Rocky Broad River, where in April, the typically verdant view of Morse's Park north side was violently transformed.

Turbid, churned waters lapped against a muddy shoreline. Sediment was staged in growing piles. An excavator scooped silt out of the lake, the drone of equipment mixing with pattering rain.

When Tropical Storm Helene ravaged areas of Western North Carolina in September, the town of Lake Lure was among those hit hard. Its lake became the dumping ground for debris that flowed down the Rocky Broad. The swollen, raging river picked up homes, vehicles, trees, mud and livelihoods from the communities of Bat Cave and [Chimney Rock](#) and deposited them in the lake's normally pristine waters.

**What comes next for Lake Lure dam?:** [Officials say Lake Lure dam 'did its job' during Helene](#)

Jim Proctor, who operates Pine Gables Log Cabins with his wife, Robin, watched the machines from the banks of his property April 2 on a rainy afternoon. In many ways, the work is good news: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has begun long-awaited lake subsurface debris and sedimentation removal, a key step toward its eventual reopening.

"The bad news is when your business model is 'romantic getaway,' our business is going to be in the tank for the foreseeable future," Proctor told the Citizen Times. They have received business loans, a grant and some donations.

"And it's a struggle, frankly. We are living on borrowed money right now and will be for a long time."

The lake is closed for the season, officials say. But the town of Lake Lure is open. And they are ready for visitors to return.

## **'We want people coming back'**

Lake Lure is a tourism-based town 30 miles southeast of Asheville in Rutherford County, with a population of about 1,300 people. But that number swells by as much as 10,000 people a day from Memorial Day to Labor Day, town spokesperson Laura Krejci said.

Scenes from 1987's "Dirty Dancing" were filmed in and around the town, and cast and crew, like stars Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey, stayed at the Lake Lure Inn while shooting. For years, the town celebrated the movie with [an annual festival](#).

The town's namesake is its most popular attraction, but it is also home to Chimney Rock State Park, which drew more than 400,000 visitors in 2023 alone. Lake Lure sits at the bottom of the Hickory Nut Gorge, a 20,000-acre, 14-mile-long canyon through the Blue Ridge Mountains, replete with forests, waterfalls, granite cliffs and trails.

The entrance to the state park, in Chimney Rock, was washed out by the storm — but [work to rebuild a temporary bridge](#) is underway by the N.C. Department of Transportation, with an estimated completion by Memorial Day. The park plans to reopen then, too.

Krejci said many nearby amenities have reopened: the park's Rumbling Bald Access, on the north side of the river, as well as Rumbling Bald golf courses and resort, Youngs Mountain, Dittmer-Watts Nature Trails, green spaces and parks.

Though areas of Morse Park are being used for temporary debris staging sites during lake restoration, the east end is scheduled for a soft opening April 25. Regrown grass and landscaping is now framing its iconic gazebo, a favorite spot for weddings.

As trees leaf out, spring-green blooms liven stark mountainsides. Despite remnants of destruction, the lake's low waters and the churn of equipment, there is a sense of near normalcy in areas of the town.

It is a dichotomy Proctor noted as he walked back through his property in April, which six months after Helene looked almost untouched by the storm. Green fields were dotted with cabins, shaded by rain-speckled trees.

With Town Hall flooded, the first council meeting after the storm was held on the back porch of the old inn at the property's entrance. Proctor is also a town commissioner.

"That's kind of the story of Lake Lure right now," Proctor said. "Places to stay, places to eat are open and lovely. And also we're still in recovery ... We want people coming back."

The storm rocked the area at the start of one of its busiest seasons as people travel to Western North Carolina by the thousands for its [vibrant fall foliage](#). With the lake closed, another tourist season is plunged into uncertainty.

"The best thing people can do to help people like me is to give us business," Proctor said.

## **Adapting after Helene**

George Carter and Adam Polaski, a couple who owns Grey Hawk Bar and Gardens, set back from the lake off of Memorial Highway, bought the 6-acre property a week before Helene.

Carter had been renting the space for about two years. It has a long history — as a veterinarian's office, a Wellness Center, a roadside convenience shop and originally, a rustic family owned campground. Now the sprawling acreage is a restaurant, bar, coffeehouse and music venue, but the space adapted after the storm.

In the early days, Carter and residents at the 8-unit apartment building on the property would light a fire and share information and company, drawing others from nearby. He offered food salvaged from the restaurant's fridges before it spoiled.

Those first few weeks were "really tough," Polaski said. "The power was out, the water wasn't clean, there was a 'no flush' order."

Once power was back, they served free coffee and bagels. They had tried opening for limited hours in the fall but saw only a trickle of visitors.

Carter said a traditional opening was clearly a "money hemorrhage" at that point. They began instead hosting themed dinners, special events and bonfire nights, offering a way to gather.

"It became evident that we needed to take this very seriously," Carter said. "We had just made a very large investment in this property and looking at statistics of what happens to businesses and communities after something like this, it's pretty grim."

They hosted a grand re-opening at the end of March, the first time the business was restored to full capacity and programming in six months, and said they saw local and tourists return.

"I think the piece that's been steadying for us is: Let's just try. ... Let's do what we can and be creative and see what happens," Polaski said. "And we've been happily surprised that what's happened is people are ready to come back. But if you don't give them a reason to come back, they're not going to."

## **'A wall of water'**

The morning Helene hit, Sept. 27, Lake Lure Mayor Carol Pritchett, who lives on the lake, said she was standing at her boathouse trying to bring up her wooden Adirondack rockers before they could float away.

At 6 a.m., the water was not yet to the bottom of the landing — but as she struggled with the rockers, she could see the waters rising. The boats were on lifts in the boathouse, normally the safest place during a storm. The water rose so quickly, it crushed them against the ceiling. By the day's end, boats would be piled five deep along the shoreline of Morse Park.

“I’ve never been in anything like that. And it just continued to rise. It was just a wall of water,” Pritchett said. There were trees 100-feet-tall coming down the Rocky Broad like missiles, impaling anything in their path. She described boulders as big as firetrucks carried by the floodwaters, debris stacked 20-feet-high above, below and between the town's Memorial and Flowering bridges.

Pritchett, who is from the gulf coast of Texas and no stranger to hurricanes, said it was the most frightening thing she had ever seen.

In the days before, the town braced for the storm. Lake Lure's Fire Chief Dustin Waycaster, also its emergency management coordinator, filmed a video urging people to prepare.

WNC was already inundated with rain.

Lake Lure saw nearly 15 inches of rain over the course of the event, from Sept. 24-28, according to the National Weather Service. But the Broad River's headwaters, closer to Chimney Rock and Bat Cave, flowing into Lake Lure, saw upward of 20 inches, more than triple the area's normal rainfall for September.

The lake had been lowered to absorb some of Helene's impact, the debris boom was in place and new weather sirens were installed and operational. But even as people heeded warnings, no one was prepared for the catastrophic storm that would follow.

In April, Waycaster stood overlooking the river. Its path had shifted, the riverbed three times wider than it was before the storm.

Behind him was the Geneva Hotel, a riverside motel and tiki bar, now a hollowed shell. The blown-out windows of the ground floor exposed the remnants of sand-filled rooms. There was no sign of the swimming pool, but Waycaster could point to where it used to be. A lone tree's bark was eaten away several feet up the trunk, where rocks, cars, campers and debris beat against it as floodwaters rushed by.

Waycaster has worked in Lake Lure for 17 years, served as fire chief for seven of them, and used to be able to tell you what an inch of rain would do to the river and lake. But now, it's all changed.

"I'm super proud of our town. For as little as we are, and how much we've accomplished as far as coming back," he said. "But we still need a lot of help."

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, Waycaster said he lost count of the number of rescues performed by his team and others, like the Helo-Aquatic Search & Rescue teams from the Carolinas and U.S. Coast Guard. They went up and down the gorge, "plucking people off the side of the mountain."

The town became an "island," Proctor said. No way in or out, unless by helicopter. Communication was cut off.

Carter was on the property when the storm hit, walled in by downed trees and power lines, the lake swollen more than a dozen feet over its banks. Entire boathouses were underwater, debris poking through the roofs of buildings. Though the Grey Hawk property is not lakeside, water sheeted down the hillsides — cascading across the ground, as if in a reflecting pool.

Carter's first glimpse of the lake was an "otherworldly experience," debris fields swirling in a giant mass on its surface.

"It's incredible what's been done in six months. But at the same time, as you look at it, it's almost like, just the tip of the iceberg," Carter said.

Polaski, also the communications director for the Campaign for Southern Equality, was away on a book tour when the storm struck. With help, Carter found his way up a mountain with just enough signal to get a call out to him.

Carter would return almost daily, relaying messages to Polaski from inside the town limits and checking on people cut off from family on the outside.

"It's really sobering to see how much as been done and how much is left," Polaski added. "That's no one's fault, it just speaks to the power of the storm .... I think there's a long road ahead."

## **When will Chimney Rock reopen?**

In nearby Chimney Rock, with a population of about 140 people, many of the businesses of Main Street lining the Rocky Broad were reduced to rubble. Mayor Peter O'Leary said the destruction there is a different beast entirely. The road into Chimney Rock Village from Lake Lure is closed to all but local traffic. He is hopeful areas of the village will reopen in the coming weeks, in time for the return of Chimney Rock State Park.

O'Leary estimated about 30% of its businesses were destroyed and all find themselves in a "precarious position." The village's bridges were washed out, more than 30 homes destroyed and the main highway



devastated. There was **one reported death** in Chimney Rock, Lisa Peeler Brady, and **four total in Rutherford County**.

While not "wiped off the map," rebuilding Chimney Rock is a daunting task, but work is underway.

"We're not just going to flip a switch on Memorial Day and everything's going to go back to normal," O'Leary said. "We're going to be struggling for years trying to reach some sort of normality."

The village is eager to welcome back visitors, he said, "but also I want them to be careful and patient and realize that there may be disruptions."

It is a "tightrope" they're walking.

"We do depend on tourists and the tourism economy to survive. And all of us realize that we're nervous about people coming in and seeing the village all torn up, but at the same time we need people to come in and support us," O'Leary said. He hopes people can witness milestones as the village rebuilds.

## **'Life of the town'**

While the priority should always be around loss of life and property, Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute, said natural disasters are incredibly disruptive for tourism, especially in the short term.

Harrill is a research professor in hospitality and tourism at the University of South Carolina, with deep ties to Western North Carolina.

He pointed to cities like New Orleans and Charleston, South Carolina, which have seen tourism rebound after major natural disasters.

"Tourism economies do bounce back," Harrill said. "A silver lining, if there is any, is it allows you to go into and rebuild with sort of a new vision of where you want to go."

As subsurface lake debris removal began, Mayor Pritchett said there was a new sense of joy and hope to see the next phase of work begin on "the life of the town."

"We will certainly open the lake as soon as we can, but I'll tell you for the future health of Lake Lure, we need to do this right," Pritchett said. "We need to get all the sediment and debris out so that moving forward, it will be better than it ever was."

**More:** [Despite rumors, mayor says, Chimney Rock will rebuild from Tropical Storm Helene](#)

**More:** [NCDOT announces locations for two bridges in Chimney Rock: Where will they be rebuilt?](#)

**More:** [Asheville council approves \\$225M federal Helene recovery funding plan to be sent to HUD](#)

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