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Family of drowned woman files suit

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GAFFNEY - A lawsuit filed Wednesday in federal court seeks compensation in the drowning last year of an elderly woman who took a wrong turn in Cherokee County and drove down a paved road that ends in a boat ramp.

The car driven by Tecora Huey Young, 77, on Oct. 18 plunged into the Broad River at the Big Bay Access Area.

After Young was reported missing, her body was not found until Dec. 15, when workers saw her submerged car not far from the ramp after the river's water level was lowered for maintenance.

Attorneys Pat Knie of Spartanburg and Ken Holland of Gaffney have filed the complaint on behalf of Phillip Lee Huey, who is representing Young's estate.

Named as defendants in Young's death were Duke Energy Carolinas LLC, the S.C. Department of Natural Resources and the Gaffney Board of Public Works.

The lawsuit asked for unspecified actual and punitive damages, including any recoverable amounts under the state's Wrongful Death Act to be determined by a jury.

"It's truly shocking, the first time I drove down the road and saw it ended as a boat ramp in Broad River with no lights, no barricades, with nothing to give me or anyone any clue as to the danger ahead," Knie said.

"It's very easy to understand why she did what she did. She was not familiar with the area. Her death could have easily been avoided."

Young, who lived in Asheville, N.C., had been visiting family in the Concord community, where she attended a birthday party for a relative.

Investigators said when Young left the home where the party was held, she took a wrong turn onto Sarratt Road, a direct route to access the river via the boat ramp.

The lawsuit listed the defendants' alleged roles in the ramp construction and access.

Duke Energy secured a license through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to build a series of dams on the Broad River and control use and access to the river, including where Sarratt Road ends at the Big Bay Access Area, the lawsuit states.

The Gaffney Board of Public Works built or allowed construction of the boat ramp, creating parking and other improvements there for the public in conjunction with recreational boating and fishing, the document states.

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources approved the enhancement plan for the ramp area, the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit listed several points of negligence. Included were the lack of advance warning of the ramp's approach, the direct access to the ramp via the road and a lack of barricades and night lighting.

Representatives of the defendants had limited reaction to the lawsuit.

Gaffney Board of Public Works General Manager Donnie Hardin confirmed he had a copy.

"But I haven't read the lawsuit yet, and I can say only that the Board of Public Works has a raw water pumping station there, but we are not party to boating or ramp activities," Hardin said.

Andy Thompson, with Duke Energy's corporate communications, said the company's attorneys had not reviewed the lawsuit and he could not comment.

Mike Willis, spokesman for the state Department of Natural Resources, also would not comment without reading the lawsuit.

"I have not received a copy," he said.

Knie said similar lawsuits have been filed in other areas of the country, including San Francisco and Indiana.