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Lake Chesterfield goes down the drain

Joel Currier
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The 22-acre Lake Chesterfield disappeared in June 2004 because of a sinkhole which emptied the lake within two days. Photo by Sam Leone of the Post-Dispatch

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Recent heavy rain may have washed Lake Chesterfield down the drain.

A sinkhole at the bottom of the 23-acre lake in Wildwood swallowed millions of gallons of water in a few days this week.

The sinkhole "was just like a ticking time bomb," said geologist Dave Taylor. "It held for all this time, and finally it broke loose."

Nearby residents say the water in the man-made lake began draining rapidly last weekend. By Wednesday afternoon, the lake had vanished, revealing a squishy, muddy basin and a 50-foot-wide crack in the lake's northern end. When full, the lake had an average depth of 7 to 10 feet.

On Thursday, residents were still marveling at the dry lake. Petr Ivanchuk, 50, who lives in a nearby development, said: "It was dropping lower than it was supposed to be, and two days later, it was like, 'fyooosh!'"

"This is just freaky, " said Donna Ripp of Chesterfield. "It's just sad. You buy your house out on a lake like this, and look what happens."

Some residents questioned whether construction nearby had caused the lake to drain.

But Taylor, who inspected the lake bed Wednesday, discounted that theory. The sinkhole probably was caused by water built up from recent thunderstorms, Taylor said. The water flowed underground to an above-ground spring about four miles north of the lake. He said Missouri's karst topography features porous limestone that cracks and dissolves when it becomes saturated with water. When water breaks down the limestone bedrock over time, it carves underground pockets of air. Those spaces can cause the bedrock to collapse, forming a sinkhole.

Lake Chesterfield dams water from Caulk's Creek, which flows to the Missouri River, Taylor said.

Glenn Powers, planning director for St. Louis County, said the Wildwood area is not known for developing sinkholes. The lake and housing were built before the city was incorporated in 1994. He said aerial photos kept by the county had indicated no presence of sinkholes.

"These things happen," Powers said.

Sinkholes are formed by the same kinds of geological conditions that carve out underground caves. According to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Missouri is home to more than 5,000 underground caves, thanks to its karst topography. Karst is extremely common throughout the Midwest and is characterized by rolling landscape, springs, caves and losing streams, which are streams that lose water to the adjacent aquifer when the water table drops below the stream level.

Teresa Haire, a manager for the Harbor of Lake Chesterfield Homeowners Association, said the lake was built when the housing development went up in the late 1980s. About 60 of the 676 houses and condominiums in the development border the lake, she said.

Haire said some residents are concerned that the sinkhole could have been caused by silt runoff from a neighboring construction site for the Enclaves at Cherry Hills development.

Carrie Hermeling, a lawyer representing JMB, LLC, the developer of the Enclaves at Cherry Hills, acknowledged some silt runoff into a smaller lake that borders Lake Chesterfield. But she said a June 4 test of that smaller lake — known as Upper Lake Chesterfield — showed no "measurable change" (six or more inches) in its water level.

Haire said Taylor, the geologist, and an engineer are developing a plan to seal the sinkhole. Taylor said it could take about a month to repair. Cost estimates of that work are not available. Haire confirmed that because the lake is private property, subdivision residents would have to foot the bill.

A stream of cars and trucks lined Pierside Lane on the northern edge of the lake most of Thursday. Scores of people peered over the barren landscape, where cranes feasted on dead fish on the lake floor. Several observers pinched their noses from the smell of the fish and boggy lake bottom.

Eric Ripp of Chesterfield stood with his wife, Donna, at the northern edge of the lake Thursday afternoon. Ripp said he was amazed by the sight.

"Mother Nature," he said. "Don't mess with her."

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