

Statement at 4-10-07 Council Meeting
-Chris Smithson

Fellow Councilmembers, Southern Pines Residents, and other interested parties:

I think this is one of those situations where someone involved here is not going to be very happy about something I have to say. Because that is an inherently unfair situation, I'll be sure to say enough to make pretty much everyone here unhappy about something. It's only fair.

“Here we go again. This is going to hurt.” That’s what I thought to myself a year or so ago when I got word we’d be hearing from Pine Needles regarding a proposed development of over 1,000 homes. The uproar over the Leith property had died down and public Council meeting attendance had once again dropped from over 100 at every meeting to a mere handful like usual.

“Here we go again,” I thought. “First, we’ll hear from the next door neighbors as it is only natural for the first reaction to any new development to be “not in my back yard.” Sure enough, we got letters to the editor, anonymous flyers and even an anonymous website characterizing developers and property owners as vultures and the Council as hapless rubes.

People were understandably concerned about the impact of such a large development like the one Pine Needles had proposed. There wasn’t a single member of the Council who didn’t also share many of the same concerns. It seemed like the Council’s interest in looking at the proposal carefully and considering what out of it might be appropriate for Southern Pines was not the “sky is falling” reaction some wanted us to have.

Opponents of Pine Needles village set their sights on the Planned Unit Development ordinance proposed by the owners of the property. Although the passage of the ordinance would not grant a single development right to the property owner, many opposed it as a way to block the project. I think it is important to say that again. If the PUD ordinance were to pass, it would give Pine Needles no additional rights to develop their property. Contrary to the lies some people have been spreading as part of a calculated campaign of disinformation, passage of the ordinance would not give Pine Needles the right to put a strip shopping center on Midland Rd. It would not allow for massive shopping centers anywhere else on the property. Passage of the ordinance would not all of the sudden allow thousands of homes to be built there. It would not allow them to develop their property any differently than they already have a right to develop it. Anyone who tells you different is lying. If they are not intentionally lying, they are so woefully misinformed they shouldn’t be out there trying to sway anyone’s opinion. The only thing the passage of the PUD ordinance would give to a developer is the right to submit a development application to the town. At that point, the town would have the opportunity to review the project and its potential impacts and decide if it is appropriate for Southern Pines.

One of the major objections to PUD zoning or Pine Needles Village specifically has been the effect on the “character” of our town. As I have said before, there is more to the character of a town than the look and feel of the buildings and streets or a certain population density. Some contend allowing more people or more shopping in town will change the town’s character. I contend that the character of our town is also defined by the people here. Land use, while a factor, is only one of many things which affect Southern Pines as we know it. Certainly the hysteria, lack of reason, and manipulative disinformation campaigns we’ve endured over the last six months are not what most residents would proudly cite as defining the character of Southern Pines. Maybe those things do define us somewhat, but it’s sure not the Southern Pines I want it to be.

Here some interesting things I have heard over the last few months:

-At a forum I attended, I spoke about the issue of housing affordability and how as supply dwindles, rising costs will make it harder for people of more moderate means, like teachers, police officers, etc. to live in Southern Pines. One of the participants said, “What’s wrong with that?”

-Some have claimed that a large out of town developer doesn’t know what is “best for Southern Pines.” To that I ask, does that mean everyone small and local will do the right thing? If you think that, you haven’t paid attention to what some of these “little local guys” have done to or tried to do in Southern Pines and surrounding communities.

-Some have equated a high-density development with “sprawl.” I’m sorry, but high density and sprawl are opposites. Given a set number of people, higher density prevents sprawl. Of course the old joke in planning circles says there are two things Americans won’t stand for- density and sprawl.

-A local environmentalist, acknowledging we are expected to have thousands of people moving to the area in the next few years regardless of whether or not any of these large developments happen, suggested putting all of the newcomers in downtown Southern Pines. Seeing as how the downtown of Southern Pines and the surrounding neighborhoods are almost fully built-out, the only way to cram all these people in downtown would be to raze most of our historic buildings and cottages in favor of new high rises big enough to accommodate a few thousand more people. Talk about affecting the character of our town!

-I’ll paraphrase here. Someone said, “Southern Pines is not about large developments. It’s about piecemeal development- you know 2-3 properties at a time by some local guy.” I ask, do you live in the old part of Southern Pines? Weymouth Heights? Knollwood? Mid South? National? Sandhurst? Etc.? While the homes here have been built over a period of over 100 years, the real difficulty would be to find many instances of homes built in areas which were NOT major subdivisions and planned development. From the old core of town to Forest Creek, this is a town formed not by random piecemeal development, but by planning going back as far as the late 1800’s. Most of what Southern Pines is today

didn't just randomly happen- it was planned. You can't say that about most towns our size, but it is true of ours.

For all the supposed worries about the impacts of the Pine Needles development, where are the cries, protests, petitions, etc. about the development at Little River Farm- a massive 1000+ unit project with a large retail component directly adjacent to our ETJ in Carthage's territory? If we're worried about schools and watersheds and traffic and growth, why are we not concerned about what is going on in a project with quite a few properties in Southern Pines closer to it than to Pine Needles. Are we really concerned about all these factors and what is going on around us or are we so nearsighted as to only pay attention to what is proposed within our borders? Be warned that our taxes and traffic and schools will likely be much more affected by what our neighbors do than even the worst horror stories about what might happen at Pine Needles or Morganton Rd or near the airport.

People keep asking for impact studies and have questioned why the town has not done them already. That's easy. How can one do impact studies without a proposal on which to study and project the impact? If someone has 500 acres of undeveloped land, should the Town take it upon itself to commission impact studies based on the infinite combinations of what could possibly be put there? Might there be 50, 10-acre horse farms there operating off wells and septic tanks or would there be 1,000 homes? What those who choose to spread misinformation about the PUD amendment conveniently leave out of their arguments is that the ordinance as proposed would require a myriad of impact studies to be done based on a specific proposal. Besides, as I said before the specific issue before us, the PUD amendment, has no impact. It is text on a page and does not allow anyone any rights to build anything. Impact study completed. The PUD amendment would have absolutely no effect on water, sewer, schools, traffic, or the problem of unwanted pets.

Some have called for some kind of moratorium in town claiming we have no land use plan or that the one created in 1988 is old and therefore worthless. As best I can see, everyone in this room was conceived earlier than 1988. Does that mean we're all worthless? Should we lock ourselves in our homes lest we ruin everything on account of our advanced ages? If the current land use plan said "2005" on it and had updated population projections would we be hearing the same objections? I haven't heard anyone come up with a single critique of the land use plan except that it is old and slightly overestimates the population level we'd be at by now. I personally think the plan is pretty good, but it does need to be reviewed regularly and modified where necessary. That was the intent of the document and that is certainly an area where the town has dropped the ball.

Serving on the Council has been more frustrating than I thought it would be. When I decided to run for office, I felt the town was generally on the right path and I wanted to be part of the next generation of town stewards and continue to make things better. Some of what I found when I entered office was different than I expected. While the town was pretty efficiently run and our infrastructure was generally in good shape, woefully little

had been done in the way of proactively updating our development ordinances since our current one was put in place. Certainly, there are a few notable exceptions such as the then-visionary Morganton Road overlay district put in place in the 90's, but most other changes have been at the request of property owners and developers or in reaction to things that didn't turn out that well such as some ugly building that went up with vertical metal siding. Let's just say I feel past Councils allowed our previous manager to filter information and set policy a bit too much.

I have been asking my fellow Councilmembers for a couple of years now to agree to move forward with a Comprehensive Long Range Plan. A plan of this nature looks at the town as a whole, not just land use. It looks at where we came from, where we are, and where we want to be. As land use is only a part of what makes Southern Pines what it is, it is important to take a comprehensive approach to the town's future. Unfortunately, I have never received a very positive response to my urgings that we move forward with the evaluation and planning process. About the only reason I have gotten for this reluctance is that the process will be expensive. For sure there will be a cost, probably a significant one in terms of effort and dollars, but what is the cost of doing nothing? People are right, Southern Pines is entering a very important period in our town's history. As we approach build-out, we're not just looking at what might be in someone's long-undeveloped back yard, we're looking at the likelihood of significant redevelopment in historic parts of town, especially West Southern Pines. In my opinion, skyrocketing property values, development pressures in existing neighborhoods, the school system, and other factors will have a MUCH greater effect on the future character of our town than whatever happens on a handful of larger undeveloped properties on the edges of town. The real issues we are facing will affect not just how many people live in Southern Pines, but WHO can and will live here. I'm 34 years old and am a Southern Pines native. I expect to live here until I die- hopefully at least 50 years from now. I'm not afraid to buy green bananas. My vision for Southern Pines reaches far into the future- 20, 30, 50+ years to when maybe I'm on old timer out in the crowd at a public hearing like this asking the Council to just hold off on any changes until I die or go to a rest home. They tell me by then we'll have flying cars, so I guess traffic won't be a problem.

My family moved here 50 years ago this year. My grandfather served on the Council in the mid 1960's, my father in the mid 70's until the mid 80's. Both also served on the Planning Board. I'll serve on the Council at minimum until 2009 when my current term is up. My family has always cared enough about this town to not only speak up when necessary, but to step up and serve too. Right now, I am speaking up AND stepping up for the future of Southern Pines. **In the spirit and intent of our ordinances and in deference to all the dedicated residents who have brought this wonderful town this far, I believe we should postpone a vote on the Planned Unit Development ordinance until after, at the earliest possible date, we can call and hold special sessions with relevant boards to discuss and vote on a moratorium for up to one year on things such as, but not limited to, major subdivisions and zoning and conditional use permits on planned residential developments.** The reason for the moratorium would be to allow the town to have time to develop a Comprehensive Long Range Plan, which would include updates to our land use plan, Unified Development Ordinance, and other

land-use-related and unrelated documents. It is my hope that any updates will include adding a Planned Unit Development provision to our ordinances as it is one of the best available tools for structuring and planning the development of larger tracts of land using current best practices. I have always held that having a Planned Unit Development provision as a tool will be beneficial to the town. Calling for a temporary moratorium is in no way inconsistent with this. It will give us time to be sure that all our guiding documents and codes are as progressive and up to date as they can be.

A moratorium, if passed, does not let anyone off the hook. I am continually dismayed by the expected, but still disappointing, drive-by activism that comes up with seemingly every major or minor project. Just last month, well over a hundred people sat here in this room calling for moratoriums and open government, and citizen-driven plans among other things. These are all grand ideas, but pretty much everyone evacuated the room when their items of interest were finished, leaving the room virtually empty of “concerned citizens” despite the fact that there were several other pretty important items on the agenda. The same thing has happened at recent planning board meetings and on other issues in the past. If your concerns about the town’s overall direction are genuine and not just related to a specific project or two, it is your duty to attend meetings regularly, speak with Councilmembers regularly, and take an active and productive role in the upcoming planning process which will require a lot of hard work from everyday residents. At the very least, we need a reasonable level of support when we do take actions to proactively protect the town. One of the leaders of the “No PUD” petition movement was also one of the leaders of a petition to the Council from most of the realtors, developers, and commercial property owners in town protesting the Council’s actions when we dared to make the audacious move of trying to put in place architectural standards to ensure new commercial construction in town fits in with its character. A few people wrote in to the Pilot, but most of the public was silent in support of the Council’s actions to preserve the character of the town. We acted proactively for the conservation of our town but all we heard was the screams of realtors and commercial developers who seemingly wish to have no regulations on their activities at all. Where was our backup? As they say, “if you’re not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.” In my opinion, the solution to our long term planning needs is to put in place a temporary and limited moratorium until which time we can review, update, and create relevant plans and documents. If any resident chooses not to put thought and time into the process, they have no right to complain later on. If you think we have a problem, will you be part of the solution?

I strongly urge the Council to enact a reasonable moratorium as soon as possible and just as quickly start taking the steps necessary to set the creation of a Comprehensive Long Range Plan in motion.