

Statement at February 12 Council meeting regarding Pin Needles Village application

-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember

Ever since July 24th 2006 when representatives from Pine Needles attended a Council work session and presented plans for Pine Needles Village, I have liked the concept of what they wanted to do. Of course, the specific details needed to be hammered out and concerns addressed, but the concept of a planned neighborhood with a traditional neighborhood design seemed, and still does seem, to be the right way to handle the development of one of the few remaining large tracts of undeveloped land in Southern Pines. Providing walkable communities with nearby parks and shopping for residents is what today's progressive planners do.

Over the last year and a half, the applicants and town boards have worked through the process of how to apply for such a project as well as specifics of this particular plan. After countless hours of work on the PUD ordinance and the Pine Needles Village proposal, the Planning Board unanimously recommended the application before us. Renowned rural conservation planner, Randall Arendt reviewed the PUD ordinance and Pine Needles Plan. He was very critical of the PUD ordinance but actually said the Pines Needles plan, even at its higher original density, was so desirable Southern Pines should keep the ordinance in order to approve Pine Needles and then throw it away and start from scratch. The recommendations of the Planning Board as well as a renowned rural conservation planner both say a lot.

Many people have expressed many concerns about what the project's impacts might be. I'll hit on a few with a few things to think about.

Traffic: This was one of my first concerns when I learned of the scope of the project. Ultimately, some of the effects on the immediate area and mitigations for those effects are unsatisfactory to me. On the other hand, if you look at the bigger picture, if people currently living in the immediate area of the project as well as those who live to the north and east of it were to do some of their grocery and other shopping in Pine Needles instead of having to go down to Aberdeen, it could likely have a positive effect on the current messes that are US-1 south, 15-501, and the dreaded traffic circle.

Downtown: Will creating a downtown-like commercial area at Pine Needles Village hurt downtown Southern Pines? There is no way to predict that for sure, but I'll add some thoughts. If the applicant built the maximum permissible amount of retail space, it would be 200,000 sqft, about the size of Wal Mart in Aberdeen or just over one full block downtown Southern Pines. Downtown Southern Pines is a unique, vibrant, community of restaurants, bars, and specialty retailers that has evolved into its current state because, not in spite of, retail and residential development in other parts of our community. Downtown Southern Pines is special and could not be easily replicated in an all-new development and at a much smaller scale. On the other hand, Pinehurst already has a beautiful, authentic downtown. If well executed, won't Pinehurst's Newcore plans for a revitalized downtown have a bigger effect on Southern Pines? What if residents and visitors in Pinehurst stay in Pinehurst and no longer come over to Southern Pines like they do in droves?

Population: Whether or not Pine Needles Village is built, people, lots of people, are still moving to Moore County. For example, while there was a big ruckus over 1,000 homes going in Pine Needles, the Little River development, just outside our town limits in Carthage has plans for 1,000 homes. Hundreds more homes can go in Aberdeen's development at Legacy. Pinehurst still has several thousand undeveloped lots. Whispering Pines has already approved subdivisions for several hundred more units. With or without Pine Needles, Moore County is expecting more than 20,000 new residents by 2020, twelve years from now. While one couldn't completely deny that a few people who wouldn't give Moore County a second look might move to the area specifically because they like Pine Needles, doesn't it make more sense that most potential residents for Pine Needles Village either live here already or would be coming here anyway? It's a nice project, but it is not Disney World. If they live here already or would be coming here anyway, doesn't that make it a choice of where in Southern Moore County they will live rather than whether or not they will end up here at all?

Financial and Infrastructure impacts: Unless we want to cut services or raise taxes, we must continue to grow our tax base. More property means more tax dollars. More people mean more of our share of local sales taxes. All new homes and businesses already pay water and sewer impact fees. Southern Pines is also one of the few municipalities in the state authorized to impose impact fees on new development. While we only have them for water and sewer, we can and should impose them for other things too. For example, if new development means we need a new fire station, we can make it pay for that. The same can apply for many capital needs necessitated by new development.

I have concerns about our water supply. The bottom line, however, is that the concerns are there with or without the approval of Pine Needles village. We have a new reservoir in the works in case our water source gets too low in the summer. Again, we need it with or without more development. We need it as soon as possible. As a percentage of total production at full build out or especially building completed before the reservoir is built, Pine Needles Village would not be the key factor in the viability of our water capacity. The safety of our water supply hinges on getting the reservoir built, not on Pine Needles.

I could go on, but those seem to be the major point most people hit on. Hopefully, I have effectively pointed out that there are multiple sides and arguments for all the key issues.

To this point, it should be clear I like the Pine Needles concept and feel there are good reasons it could be a positive contribution to the town. I also do realize that whatever my vote is, it probably won't have an effect on the overall outcome of the project. Still, my vote means something, so I'll go on.

Now we need to get to the issue of where the Town is planning-wise. We have a land development plan from 1988. I believe the plan pretty clearly indicates Pine Needles Village is the type of project intended for Southern Pines and specifically this property. I've been saying for years that Southern Pines needs a new comprehensive plan. The only person I know of who pushed for it before Pine Needles Village came up is the late Jerome Ingram, who mentioned it when he last ran for office. I still believe comprehensive planning should be our top priority as a town. Years of neglect by past Councils has transformed our planning situation from a strong, proactive one in 1989 to a weak and reactive one over the last twenty years. To the extent that I may have contributed to this dereliction of the Council's duty, I apologize to

the residents and the applicant. Unfortunately, we have no recently reviewed or created plan and have no tools in place to give us some breathing room in which we can create one without having to make decisions like this one without the best tools.

Because we are in such a poor situation, with a plan that hasn't been officially reviewed in almost twenty years, I have to look at this application under less than ideal circumstances. As I said before, I believe the current plan, as old as it may be, indicates the Pine Needles Village project should be approved. Additionally, it is important to look at the current underlying zoning on the property. Planned Development, or PD, is the current zoning for the property. That zoning category allows for commercial uses and large-scale residential developments. In fact, the only thing the applicant is asking for that can't already be done there is the retail component. To me, this is a better development if there are stores residents can walk, bike, or drive on internal roads to. PD allows for hundreds, if not thousands more homes on this property than what the applicant is asking for. PD allows for much more commercial development than what the applicant is asking for.

To me, under current existing circumstances within Southern Pines' jurisdiction, approving this PUD rezoning not only gives us a much better vision for what will go on the property it gives us much more control in ensuring what goes there is an asset to the Town.

Therefore, because the village concept reflects current planning best practices, because the Planning Board has unanimously recommended approval, because it has the smallest potential impact on our High Quality Water allocation, because a world renowned rural conservation planner endorsed it, because it follows our officially adopted land development plan, and because this rezoning application is preferable to existing zoning of the property, I feel I must support this rezoning.