

Moratorium- Oh the Irony!

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

The almost two-year battle over the Pine Needles property opened some deep wounds in our town that will take a long time to heal. Much of the opposition, especially early on, relied heavily on gross exaggeration, straw man arguments, sweeping generalizations, and good old fear-mongering. I was a vocal critic of those who chose these tactics over reasonable, informed debate on the issues. How can we expect to work through an issue if we cannot have productive discussions about it?

That's why I find it quite ironic that opponents of the proposed moratorium in Southern Pines, led by the Chamber of Commerce and the Moore County Homebuilders Association, seem to be using many of these same tactics.

Straw Man Argument: The Chamber and others have put a lot of focus on the details of Southern Pines' Land Development Plan. They argue to the merits of the plan as if a significant number of people in town have been critical of it. As a Councilmember, I have been to a lot of meetings in the last couple of years and have read many articles on the subject of the plan. Almost nobody has been specific and critical of anything major in our plan. The problem has been that the Council has not officially reviewed it every three to five years as required by the plan. The merits of the plan should be argued as part of the official review, not as a reason to ignore the fact that it hasn't been touched since 1988.

Exaggeration: Much has been said about how the proposed moratorium is some kind of attempt at or will result in "stopping growth" in town. The ordinance, as written, does not do this. Furthermore, if it is to pass, it will almost certainly be modified from the current language. Back to "stopping growth," let's explore what the ordinance would likely have no effect on.

Below are approved residential projects that can be built or completed even if the moratorium is passed. Information is from the Planning Dept.

	Approved	Built	% Max Buildout
National	465	216	46%
Mid-South Club	647	130	20%
Forest Creek	750	147	20%
Longleaf	509	285	56%
Talamore	478	174	36%
The Carolina	867	7	1%
Glenmoor	28	4	14%
The Arboretum	173	0	0%
<u>Mill Creek</u>	<u>350</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0%</u>
Totals	4267	963	23%
Difference	3304		

It should be noted that some of these developments that are farther along are unlikely to meet their maximum permitted density. Even if we account for that and make assumptions about the others doing the same thing, we're still looking at well over 2,000, if not 3,000, homes.

Commercial growth is also not stopped. There are also close to 1,000 acres with some type of commercial zoning that could likely be developed, especially if the developments are not subdivided. Especially with shopping centers, it is very common for the entire development to be under one owner and not subdivided. It is likely the hundreds of acres on Morganton road would be developed or redeveloped that way with or without a moratorium.

Taxes/Fear Mongering: In another common argument, the moratorium would "stop growth" which would lead to higher taxes for everyone. The bulk of our residential growth for many years and for many years to come will be from relatively expensive housing going up in the communities listed above. Expensive houses help keep taxes lower. As shown above, there is plenty of room in Forest Creek, etc. for more high-end homes to be added to the tax base. As noted above, commercial growth would probably not really be majorly affected by a moratorium either. Moratorium opponents point to Southern Pines' slow growth rate as a reason a moratorium is not needed. Of course, that same evidence also "proves" a moratorium would not affect much growth in the first place.

De Facto Moratorium: The Chamber criticized the council for calling a hearing before the ordinance had been drafted. They would have preferred we just hold some general meetings on the subject to see if the concept is even appropriate. First off, the hearings we are having right now are on that exact subject. Especially since nobody is actually talking about the specifics of the proposed ordinance, it really is a general discussion. More importantly, however, is that I already tried to hold a general meeting on the subject a year ago. I proposed, in front of over 100 people at a Council meeting, that we call a joint meeting with the Planning Board to discuss the subject. This motion would not have created a de facto moratorium. The majority, including two current members of the Council, voted against holding such a meeting. At a workshop a few weeks later, they still refused to discuss the matter or hold a meeting with the Planning Board. When the current moratorium was proposed, they both clearly indicated they were so against the concept of any type of moratorium it was not even worth it to hold public hearings on the matter to hear from the people. The two clearly on the Chamber's "side" in this matter are a part of why we were forced into this situation in the first place.

Conclusion:

If "stopping growth" still allows for thousands of homes and hundreds of acres of commercial, I'd be interested to see the definition of "encouraging growth."

For well over a year, I have heard other Council members argue that the merits of the plan make it unnecessary to review it. Of course, if we had started an official review a year ago when I proposed it,

we'd already be done and so many questions about the direction of the Town would no longer be up in the air. The majority of the Council voted against reviewing the plan a year ago even though they knew a review was required. Ask the Council members who have already staked out an anti-moratorium position why they voted against reviewing the Land Development Plan a year ago. Ask them why they failed for years in their duty to address the plan.

I really don't know yet the best way to go on the moratorium issue. There are many compelling reasons to go either way. I do know that I would probably not vote in favor of the ordinance as written. Even Abigail Dowd, who sponsored the ordinance, has said she believes it needs to be changed. That's why I was a bit disappointed only one person at the recent hearing on it spoke to any of the details. Hopefully, we'll hear more at April's hearing. In the end, however, I'm not sure that a moratorium is going to stop or slow development as much as either its opponents or proponents think it will.