

Police Station Situation

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

The Pilot's story on 4-13 didn't quite get the story straight about what I said at the Council meeting regarding the new police station, so I'll try to set the record straight for those who are interested.

I am against the purchase of the land next to the fire department on Pennsylvania Avenue for the purpose of building the new police department there. I oppose this because of the significant cost of purchasing and developing the site and because the site is not located in the core of downtown.

When I first got on Council, planning for the police department project was already underway. At the time, the project was just going to be an enlargement of the existing building to add much-needed space for the police to expand into. The main reason we were going to expand the building rather than relocate the police department was because residents and business owners liked having the department in its current location at the park. People at the park and walking around downtown felt safer having the police department located so close. I and many others still believe there should be a police facility in the middle of the central business district downtown.

After going in the direction of planning for expanding the existing building for a few months, we came to the conclusion that the town would be better served by building a new building instead of adding on to the old one. The old building was not very efficient, had many shortcomings in the public areas, and the expansion did not address other space needs of the town administration. We hired an architectural firm and began planning. At least a year ago, we held an all-day session with the intent of getting public input on the general layout of the building. As they knew the square footage we needed, the firm showed several options. They were all blank boxes in different configurations. All the options were shown in their context on the site. All the options were of pretty much the same mass that we would see in later, more final plans.

Having gotten the go-ahead from the Council and public, the firm began moving forward on interior programming for the building and then onto the exterior design. We received several different designs, but they were unsatisfactory to the Council and to the public. Around that same time, the property next to the fire station came on the market. The Town got an option on that property to consider putting the police building there. The Town pursued no other options for asking for more designs or hiring a different firm to work on the exterior design of the already-proposed building. It appears the majority of the Council has decided there should be no more efforts to try to make the building at the park site work.

The property next to the fire department is the site of the old town dump. Additionally, it has pretty significant drainage issues. Because of this, MAJOR site work is necessary to make it buildable. Current estimates show a cost of \$1.2 million to purchase land and make the site suitable. This is on top of a project that will probably already cost us \$6 million. Government buildings are expensive and we can't avoid building them, but adding an extra million dollars to the cost due to the insistence on using this site is no small amount.

Equally important, however, is the choice of no longer having the police in downtown where they have been for a very long time. I do not believe that moving the police out of the park and four blocks from Broad Street is a good move. People feel much more comfortable in the park or walking around downtown knowing the police station is right there. I have heard from many

people who also feel strongly about having the police go back to their old location. They, like I, do not feel having the police building down by the fire department would have the same effect as having it in the middle of downtown. Although the Pilot story said someone else brought it up, it was I who wondered aloud if First Bank would have been robbed the other day if the police department were still right next door.

For many years there have been requests for and discussion about putting a police substation in West Southern Pines, possibly at the Pool Park. If we are not going to put the police headquarters back in the old location, why not consider putting it on land the Town already owns on Henley Street near Morganton Road just a couple of blocks from the Pool Park? Since we still need public meeting space for the Council and other boards, we will still have to build a new, albeit smaller, building at the downtown park site. We could put a police substation in that building, solving the need and desire for a police presence downtown without having a massive new building in the park.

If a majority of the Council is so willing to give up on trying to make the design of the proposed building at the park more suitable, can we not at least more carefully explore other options as to where the police could go? Unlike a fire department, a police department does not really have officers sitting in the station waiting to go out on a call. They are already out driving around the community. Besides having the police building in a couple different key locations to enhance people's perception of security, the operation of the police department is not necessarily affected by its location. As there is little benefit, perceived or actual, to putting the police next to the fire station, I do not think it is worth the exorbitant costs of putting a building there. Add to that the loss of perceived security downtown and I think it is an even bigger mistake. Although it is already too late to stop the land deal, we can still make the right choice by exploring better options for serving the whole community and for less money. We owe it to our downtown. We owe it to West Southern Pines. We owe it to the taxpayers.