

Save Southern Pines

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

This will probably be one of my more muddled musings, but it's kind of a tough subject to tackle and I am not a leading social scientist. The subject is something I think a lot about though.

These days, many residents are wrapped up in trying to dictate the physical size of the town, the visual characteristics, or even the ultimate population total. What I fear is being lost in the whole flurry of "save our town" activism is the other half of the equation defining Southern Pines- the people. It's not just the physical being of all the buildings and roads and trees and other object that make this town special. It is the people who make it a community.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not naïve enough to think the cultural and demographic makeup of Southern Pines could remain a constant any more than I think there is a way we could stop people from moving here. It's just that so many people are focused on only half of the issue.

It is very easy to compare Southern Pines and Pinehurst. Here's some info from the last census (2000).

	<u>Southern Pines</u>	<u>Pinehurst</u>
Population	10,918	9,706
Race	71% White, 27% Black	95% White, 3% Black
Household Size	2.2 people	2.0 people
Median Income	\$38,822	\$58,950
Native to NC	50%	27%
Working	50%	40%
Median Age	44	60
Poverty Rate	14.6%	2.8%
Median Home Value	\$130,700	\$185,300

Obviously, even though both towns are of similar size and are right next to each other, there are some significant differences between the people living there. Compared to Pinehurst, a resident of Southern Pines is more likely to be younger, a minority, a parent, a native North Carolinian, and of more modest means.

An interesting trend between 1990 and 2000 is that black residents in Southern Pines decreased in both total number and population percentage. As so many of my classmates from school, black and white, no longer live in our home town, I believe the decrease is probably due in large part to young people leaving home for better opportunity. A few of us stayed or were able to come back, but it seems the majority of natives don't stay around after they reach adulthood.

Real estate values are going up at a fast clip in Southern Pines. Especially on the east side of the tracks, if you can find a house for sale within a few blocks of downtown, you can bet you'll pay a price unimagined only a few years ago. In efforts to "keep Southern Pines from turning into Cary," many are trying to almost put a stop to population growth and building in Southern Pines. Did you know that we would need to add an additional 23,000 people or 11,000 homes in the current Southern Pines city limits in order to equal the respective population and housing densities of Cary? Cary has three times the population density of Southern Pines and Pinehurst. Southern Pines is less dense than Pinehurst by the way. Without high-rises "turning into Cary" is impossible, but let's not let facts get in the way of good old fear mongering.

As I've said before, drastic measures to try to stop growth through exclusive zoning may not end up keeping people from moving here. What we're likely to end up with is smaller population growth but an increased level of displacement of people of more moderate income and a greatly-changed "average citizen." If the average working person cannot live in our town, we have lost something great about Southern Pines and something which Pinehurst is criticized for not having. Many mention they love Southern Pines because "all kinds of people" live here. It is already getting pretty expensive to live here, so perhaps many "average working people" already cannot afford it. If we flail around blindly worrying only about housing density and holding onto elitist attitudes of what size other people's yards should be without considering the "community" factor, we will have ruined the town by trying to "save" it.

I probably haven't done a very good job of stating my case here, but it is difficult for me to put it into words. Perhaps it's because I was raised here but did spend a few years "up North" that I appreciate even more what it means to be "from" Southern Pines and that Southern Pines is more than just a place. I suppose my point is just that; Southern Pines is more than just a place- it's a community. When trying to "save" our community, let's not forget about the people who make this place what it is.

Agree or disagree with what you just read? Want to provide feedback? Please do so. It's not even necessary to send anonymous letters or create anonymous "concerned citizens" websites. Just send an e-mail. e-mail: Chris@ChrisSmithson.com