

“The Silence is Deafening Yet Some People Can’t (Won’t) Hear It”

-Chris Smithson. Southern Pines, Native, resident, and Councilmember

For all the inaccurate information half-baked editorials, and letters in the Pilot regarding one individual who we did not appoint to the advisory committee for Southern Pines’ comprehensive long- range plan, the uproar about the people actually appointed to the committee is non-existent. To that I say, “Mission accomplished.”

Although harmony and cooperation do not sell Pilots and spur passionate letters to the editor, it is still a shame that so many seem to focus on Council disagreement over one particular individual. For all the Pilot’s characterizations of this current Council being divided, dysfunctional, and all about holding grudges, the five of us sat together in a room for six hours and interacted respectfully with each other the whole time (as we usually do). Even more significant, especially if you believe all that has been said and written about how divided we are, is that we came up with a widely varied group of twenty individuals who we agreed on unanimously. Hmmm, do you think perpetuating the myth of the Council being a deeply divided group hell-bent on personal destruction and incapable of consensus might just be more of a way to sell papers or further one’s own agenda?

There were eight people in the room when we discussed the appointment in question but none of those eight people has written a letter to the editor or an editorial. All the commentary has been from people who were not even there.

I will share the real story with the relevant background that left out of the accounts of that night. The bottom line is that there were two people strongly for the appointment of the Governor and two strongly against it. As appears to be the usual these days, I was kind of in the middle recognizing both the potential positives and potential negatives of the appointment. Mayor Haney started out arguing for the appointment and spoke to the Governor’s character and accomplishments. To a person, the rest of the Council agreed with him and stipulated to those positives. As we all basically agreed on them, there was really not much more discussion regarding the possible benefits of the appointment. There has not been a peep in Pilot news or editorials that we all agreed on the accolades of the Governor. The discussion, therefore focused on the potential negatives of appointing a former governor to the committee. I know I personally wanted to talk over the different angles with my fellow Councilmembers to flesh the whole thing out to reach the best decision.

While Councilmember Woodruff did focus on his dismay over the letter from the former town mayors, the bulk of our discussion had nothing to do with that subject. The discussion, mainly between Haney, Dowd and me, revolved around the potential negatives of having a former governor on the committee. It is important to note at this point that all of us had received feedback, pro and con, in the preceding few days regarding appointing the Governor or any former elected official of that stature. The positives and negatives we heard about from residents were exactly what we were talking about during the

meeting. There was a fair level of controversy among the public over the potential appointment even before we sat down to discuss it.

Controversy is ultimately what this whole situation boils down to and it is important to understand the big picture. There is controversy over someone not appointed but none over the individuals who we did appoint. We are beginning to embark on a long process to update the vision for our town for the next 20-25 years. For the process to be worthwhile and for the final plan to be successful, there is nothing more important than for the people of Southern Pines to have faith in the process that produces it. The Council is not writing the plan, the people of Southern Pines are. With the help of our consultant and the advisory committee, we will have a very inclusive and public process that will seek input from the entire community and allow everyone to have a voice. While not everyone in town will agree with the ultimate plan, the goal is for even those who disagree with it to feel like the process was fair and open and they had their say. Forming an advisory committee that represents varied and often opposing interests is the first step in that process. While there are any number of people in town who would be great members of the advisory committee, we had to limit it to twenty and we appointed all members unanimously.

The entire Council agreed it was best for the committee to have the full support of the board and residents. Thus, even if there may have been enough "votes" to appoint several individuals by a 3-2 margin, we all chose not to build the committee that way. There was enough disagreement over several individuals we bypassed them in favor of appointing people we all could support. Did we leave out some dedicated people who could have contributed a lot? Did we leave out several individuals I would personally have liked to see serve? Sure we did, but we appointed twenty dedicated people who will also be contributing a lot. For those who choose to blast the Council on the editorial pages for whom we did not appoint, I challenge you to call out the individuals on the committee who you think took their places and state publically why you do not think they should be there.

The Council faced criticism either way regarding the appointment of the Governor. I suppose it is our job to take the heat. I know I have heard from many people both against and in support of our not appointing Governor Holshouser to the committee. Even if you don't like one single reason any Councilmember or member of the public has put forth in support or against the appointment, the existence of significant numbers on both "sides" means the Council chose wisely to build a committee through unanimity rather than "majority rules." The integrity of the advisory committee would have been under question, thus poisoning the public planning process at its very beginning. It is going to take a long time and require a great deal of hard work to create a vision for Southern Pines and I am encouraged, through their silence, that people in town support the makeup of the committee we unanimously approved.

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