

Does Anyone Really Care?

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

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a local discussion group on the subject of growth in Moore County. During the discussion, I reiterated my general philosophy on the growth coming to the area that I have written about here. I haven't worked up any official, one-line, growth statement, but in general I believe that finding ways to accommodate inevitable growth efficiently will generally have less impact overall than futile efforts to deny the inevitable influx of new people to the area.

Someone asked me if there were many people who felt the same way I do. I replied by basically saying that unfortunately, most people don't really care. As it applies to some development, it is often only the people don't want something literally in their back yard who speak up. Other times, it's the crowd who thinks getting a Starbucks means we have "finally arrived" vs. the crowd who thinks getting a Starbucks means the end of western civilization. Much of that depends upon in whose backyard the Starbucks wants to go.

In the last year or so, we have had two very controversial developments up for discussion- the car dealership on US-1 near Midland Rd and the proposed Pine Needles Development. The car dealership debate produced a petition with something like 2,000 signatures. The Pine Needles proposal has spawned many letters to the editor and even a website put up by people in an adjacent unincorporated neighborhood just outside the town. During both "controversies" there was a fair amount of publicity and a fair amount of rhetoric from residents on subjects like "appropriate uses," "density," "planning," etc. People demanded the Town take certain land-use action to encourage or deny changes to our ordinances.

During both of these debates there were openings on the town's Planning Board. The openings were advertised and mentioned in well-attended meetings. Guess what? In the last year, I believe we have received a grand total of six applications for the Planning Board. Three of the applicants are now on the board. Some people are willing to scream and yell and attend certain meetings to complain, but only six cared enough to step up and volunteer to serve their community on the Planning Board.

Who attends Council meetings? First off, I'll admit that most meetings are pretty boring for 99% of the people out there. That said, except during controversial hearings and excluding applicants there to be heard, there are usually about five people in the audience. Two to three of them are normally the press. The other person who is usually there is Greg Z., who quite often does provide for some excitement during the public comment section at the end of the meeting. That means the last one or two people represent the rest of the 11,000 residents of Southern Pines.

What about Town elections? By state law, municipal elections are held on odd years. I think this is a good thing. It means that only people who care about who their municipal

elected officials are will bother to vote. Guess what? On average, only about 10-15% of registered voters in town vote in municipal elections. And they say turnout for the national elections is bad.

So, what's the answer to the question of whether or not anybody really cares? The answer is, if course, yes. Some people do care. Those who vote care for sure. Those who apply to work on town boards care. Those of us willing to run for office, usually at our own expense, care. Those who call, e-mail, or stop us on the street to talk about town stuff care. Even those people from outside town who chose to put up an anonymous website to bash developers (illustrated them as vultures and always "greedy") and Councilmembers ("fast tracking" for the developers, "unprepared") without ever bothering to have a civil dialogue first, care. Still, the majority doesn't care to be heard whether in a petition or at the polls or at public meetings or in the paper. Some say "that's just a fact of life", but I don't think we should accept it. I suppose the real irony is that the only people who might visit my website or bother to read what I have said here are those who care.

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