

Statement from Tuesday, December 11, 2007 Council meeting.

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

There were a few differences between what I said and what I had written ahead of time. This is a hybrid of both. Before I even got to my statement, I noted the procedural issues raised regarding proper public notice of the hearings made voting on Tuesday impossible. It made my subsequent statement somewhat moot, but I went ahead with it anyway.

I'd like to take five minutes to say a few things.

About a year and a half ago, representative of Pine Needles Village came to a Council Worksession with outlines for a very ambitious mixed-use development. At first glance there were clearly things that could be good for Southern Pines and things that could be bad for Southern Pines. Our first step was to indicate our preference as to how the developer should apply for and how the Town would evaluate the proposed project. From the handful of available options, we agreed that a PUD would be the best way to evaluate and negotiate the details of a project of this nature. At that point, I thought the process might take about six months before we had a decision on whether or not the proposal would be right for the town. I figured the PUD ordinance would take a month or two and the project phase would take a few more.

Boy was I wrong- in more ways than one. The PUD ordinance took about ten months. The Planning Board took a couple more months on the project application. The Council has had the project application with Planning Board recommendations for just under a month.

Mayor Quis would like for the current Council to vote on this proposal tonight. I understand the various reasons he wants to do so and will not go into them at this point except to say I **do** believe it is within this Council's right to vote on this proposal. In order to make voting tonight a possibility, the Council had to cram a lot of work and thought into the last three weeks. By my estimation, we have held at least sixteen hours of meetings in the last few weeks on this subject. While somewhat uncomfortable with the compressed schedule, especially on such an important issue, I was willing to put in the time and effort leaving open the possibility of a vote this evening. I made no promises to anyone on whether or not I would be ready to vote tonight.

So, where do I stand? I have spent countless hours in the last year and a half thinking about this project, studying planning, and looking at from all different viewpoints. I even took time out of a much-needed (and not nearly long enough) vacation to visit Hines' development, Palencia, in Florida. Ironically, it too is on US highway 1. It is very nice, by the way. At this point, I think we have a proposed project that in many ways could be a substantial benefit to Southern Pines. All that said, I do not think tonight is the right night to vote on this proposal.

Though I may be growing comfortable with how the larger concept of this development could fit in with Southern Pines, I think we need more time to evaluate and discuss impacts and mitigation

of the impacts of the specifics of the application. The Planning Board did a tremendous amount of work on the application and the applicant has worked very hard and in good faith to help get the application closer to what we all may deem appropriate for Southern Pines.

I'd like to address a couple of things that my unwillingness to vote tonight is NOT about.

November's election was certainly not some kind of clear referendum on this project. Ms. Dowd and Mr. Haney, two people believed to be completely opposites in their stances on this project, got essentially the same number of votes. Frankly, I believe to characterize even a simple majority of Ms. Dowd's support in November as being "anti Pine Needles" woefully sells short the stellar campaign she ran and the total package of skills, experience, vision, drive, and message she will bring to the Council. Sometime in the near future, the vote on this project will be behind us. I look forward to working with Ms. Dowd for years to come and believe there is much more, so much more, to her than a single vote on a single project.

I also have some thoughts on the outcome of the Mayoral race, but I won't go into that right now.

This is also not some way of getting out from under the responsibility of having to vote on this project. I will vote when ready. However, in many people's minds, my vote becomes meaningless next month as they assume Mr. Woodruff and Miss Dowd will vote against it. I disagree that either of them is a guaranteed "no" vote, but only time will tell that.

Regardless of election results interpretations or perceived positions of other Councilmembers, I think my job here is to vote my conscience, hopefully after having taken the necessary time to come to an informed conclusion. While this is a unique situation for Southern Pines in that this concept has been kicked around for quite some time, we've only had a little more than three weeks to go over the "final" application and Planning Board recommendations. A few years back, we spent a couple of months just dealing with whether or not there should be a Harris Teeter at a location near the airport. While it may be *possible* to deal with all of this in three weeks during the holidays, looking back it is unreasonable to *expect* that we do so. I'd need more time if this were October or if this had not been an election year.

What do we need to do moving forward?

Certainly one issue which has been on my mind from day-one has been traffic. Traffic will be a huge potential impact on our community and especially neighbors of the project. We've talked a lot about it in meetings and gone over traffic reports. Nobody should be surprised I am still concerned about traffic and the proposed mitigations. Over the past few days I have concluded I am still not satisfied with what I've seen and heard so far. I'd like to meet with DOT representatives to discuss options with them.

Water and storm water to just name a couple more are important issues I'd like to take a little more time to get a handle on. I said over a year ago that the project evaluation process will take as long as it needs to take- no more and no less. In my opinion, it needs to take more than three or four weeks for the Council to study, discuss, debate, and decide.

I've been told by many that if this project doesn't pass tonight, it will never pass. I don't know if that is true. There are five other people who I can't speak or think for. The sixteen-plus hours I spent this past few weeks in official meetings on this project pales to the time I have spent communicating with interested parties in person, on the phone, and through written correspondence. Just processing these dozens of hours of communication takes huge amounts of time. The pressure has been enormous from all directions. I've even had multiple people on both sides of the issue bring up what my father, who served on the Council and who died a year ago this coming Christmas Day- two weeks from today, would do in this situation.

In the end, I have to decide on my own which path to take. Right now, I don't think we're ready to vote. I know I am not. While the Council has discussed and debated certain aspects of the proposed project, we've never even had a discussion as to the big picture of the project and what we think about it overall. Incoming Mayor Haney has told me he greatly values the Council working together and attempting to gain a consensus. He may be a bit too idealistic that we could, as often as he thinks, find unanimous agreement among five different people on tough subjects, but I agree we need to have discussions. Let's give time, information gathering, and good-faith discussion a chance. Let's not vote on this tonight.

In conclusion, I'll try to be crystal clear on where I stand tonight. Personally, it would be a lot easier for me and my family if I voted tonight and put this chapter behind us. The remainder of the holidays would be easier for sure. Well, I am not here for personal reasons. So, while I may be leaning favorably towards this project, I don't think it is time to vote. I won't attempt to forecast how anyone else will vote, but if someone forces a vote tonight I'll be forced to vote against the application.

Thank You