

Comprehensive Long Range Plan October 2006

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

Some members of the community have suggested the Town of Southern Pines needs a "Master Plan" or "Comprehensive Long Range Plan." I agree. I have brought up this issue in council meetings and e-mails to Councilmembers for quite some time.

Many people have mentioned to me they really liked my "article in the Pilot" last year regarding the subject of a certain property on US-1 owned by a car dealer. Actually, I did not write an article. The Pilot got a hold of an e-mail I sent to fellow Councilmembers regarding what I believed to be a lack of long-range planning and review of our land use plan. The Pilot article focused on the portion of the e-mail addressing the controversial property in question, but didn't go into the second half that started with, "So, why am I writing about all of this?" Here's part of that.

"Secondly, and not unrelated, is the subject of overall proactivity. This case, even more so than other recent good examples, clearly illustrates the need for even more long-range planning, tweaking, etc. with our ordinances. All of us have the responsibility to continually evaluate our different ordinances and "shore them up" or change them drastically when necessary. We've taken some good steps in that direction with things like new appearance standards and multifamily regulations, but surely there is more to be done. It is said that even the best battle plans go obsolete when the fighting starts. We cannot sit back and rest on our 16 year-old UDO and zoning map even though they are pretty good. We all know the pressures and problems we are facing as a town. It is our duty to get more ahead of things. As much as Pinehurst bugs me and as much as I think their "Comprehensive Long Range Plan" is contrary to the interests of everyone in the county NOT in Pinehurst, I respect them for having a plan. They also just overhauled their development ordinance.

...we can surely do a lot to avoid the battles in the first place by thinking ahead. "

We've talked about the subject of the plan a few times, but there hasn't been much enthusiasm by a majority of the Council to get into one. One of the concerns is cost. Pinehurst did spend quite a lot of money on theirs, but we may actually have more of the pieces of the plan in place than they did. Additionally, we don't have to necessarily use the same methodology they did. We already have long-range plans for many departments, so much of the work may have already been done.

Some point to the zoning map and UDO as being our long range plan. As far as land use goes- and land use is what most people seem to care about these days- they do cover things fairly well. To say that the UDO is generally not a good plan is to say that we don't like what Southern Pines looks like today. Much of the current zoning was put in place to classify already existing development in the town which mostly happened before

zoning was ever put in place. As good as the map may be and as well as most things might have turned out before zoning existed, the last time the Town took a hard look at the overall plan was the late 1980's, when the current version of the UDO was adopted. Fortunately, the Planning Board does more than just have meetings about PUD's. Earlier this year, the Council asked the Planning Board to do a review of the entire zoning map and come up with any recommendations for changes. I understand they are close to finishing their study and will be presenting their recommendations shortly. This is exactly the type of thing the Planning Board is supposed to do and I am happy they are becoming more of a proactive board instead of merely responding to specific applications before them. After all, it is called the "Planning" Board, not the "Reacting" Board. I'm not blaming the Planning Board here. As the board serves at the pleasure of the Council, it was the Council's responsibility to ask the Planning Board to take on certain new projects or roles. I believe it was the Planning Board who did a large share of the work in creating the existing UDO almost 20 years ago.

Although land use is much of what is in the news and what seems to stir up the most controversy, there is more to being "Southern Pines" than just land use. A plan or vision statement would hopefully attempt to define this community's identity, and if desired, how to maintain and encourage it. It would also recognize that no one aspect of the community sits all on its own. Land use planning affects development which affects real estate prices which effect demographics which affect service requirements and so on. Everything is interrelated.

Some aspects of the community which could be addressed in a comprehensive plan might include:

-Diversity: Although Moore County is typically described by the outside press as inordinately "rich" and "white," that is not true about Southern Pines. If you look at census data, Southern Pines is very similar to the racial makeup and average household income levels of North Carolina overall. Many residents, including me, appreciate this balance and believe it to be an asset and something that makes us different from some of our neighbors. If diversity is an important part of Southern Pines, a plan would have steps to encourage and maintain it. Things such as a healthy employer base and maintaining a variety of housing stock would almost certainly be part of that plan.

-Economic Development: The whole area's economy took hits from the multiple plant closings and the tourism downturn a few years ago. A plan would probably include goals for diversifying our economic base while also defining certain types of business development considered to be of minimal impact to our quality of life.

-Growth: That's the controversial subject these days. The town can grow in many ways and not just from new development. Take annexation for example. There are quite a few areas in the town's jurisdiction, but not within the city limits. Areas like Lost City have come up in the press for being surrounded by the town but not "in" the town. What about the other little islands all over the map? What about developed areas on the fringes like

McDeed's Creek or Highland Trails? Should all these areas be brought into town to have their full voice in town matters and contribute to the tax base like the rest of us?

-Water: Southern Pines, when nobody else in the county wanted to join in, went out on its own and built its own water treatment plant back in the early 1980's. Water is a big subject of discussion in the county these days. Southern Pines, especially after we build our new reservoir, should be in pretty good shape with water well into the future regardless of how many people end up living in our handful of currently undeveloped areas. Do we continue on our own with our own system knowing our water situation looks pretty good, or do we give up our control of our utility destiny and hand things over to a regional or county body? We all know how Pinehurst loves having their water system controlled by someone else.

We do need some kind of comprehensive long range plan to address the future of our town. It can be a huge document, but it doesn't have to be. It's up to us. Now that the town is getting pretty "full," new development, or efforts to limit it, will likely have a greater effect on the existing character of our town. As I've said before, a lot of people will be moving to this area and there is not much we can do about it. We can't build a wall or hit the "pause" button. If we love our town and want to preserve *or* change its identifying characteristics, we need to identify them and make plans to address our needs. Of course, John Lennon said, "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans," so it is probably unrealistic to think the world will stop while we spend a year or two on a plan. We'll just have to do our best with what comes before us while working a comprehensive plan we should have started on a long time ago.

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