

## **Some Thoughts About Growth Coming to Southern Pines and Surrounding Communities**

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

They're coming and there's nothing we can do to stop them. "They" are the 20,000 or so people projected to move to Moore County in the next fifteen years. As with the growth of the last fifteen years, most will happen in the southern part of the county close to all the amenities and where municipal services like water and sewer are available. Over the last few years, projects ranging from Bi-Lo to Midland Green to New Core to Pine Needles have raised concerns and often protests from many citizens.

First, as a native of Southern Pines, I have to say that if you moved here in the last 15 years and now complain about increased traffic, increased population density, and proliferation of new businesses, you first need to blame yourself. By moving to the place you fell in love with, you have changed it forever. That said, I would like to follow with "welcome." You add to the richness and positive growth of this area that while continually changing, usually does so for the better.

Just as we couldn't stop recent transplants from moving here, there's not much we can do to stop the growth coming in the next few years. What we *can* do is make all efforts to handle that growth as efficiently as possible and minimize its impact on the wonderful area in which we live. To some, the way to deal with coming growth and inevitable change is to make efforts to deny a place for that growth to happen. Many suggest moratoriums or keeping residential zoning limited to large lots or denying new retail development.

Some of these efforts seem to make sense. After all, if we cut off the supply here, won't they just move over to the next town? Well, even though technically in southern Moore there are several "next towns," they all come together with common borders forming one community in which the different neighborhoods' (towns') actions affect each other. For example, since the villages with the highest growth rates since 1990 (Pinehurst and Whispering Pines) pretty much refuse to allow businesses providing basic services and goods to locate within their municipal limits, the corresponding retail growth in that time period happened in Southern Pines and Aberdeen. I always find it ironic to see letters in the Pilot from people in Pinehurst or Whispering Pines complaining about the traffic and retail growth they caused in Southern Pines and Aberdeen. Did Bi-Lo just happen upon that spot or were they trying to get as close to Pinehurst as possible? The same goes for Olmstead Village, Fresh Market, and the Food Lion on Hwy 5.

If we reduce the supply of potential places where people can live, it might keep some away, but there's also a pretty good chance it will greatly affect existing areas. Recently, there was much discussion about the destruction of historic cottages in downtown to make way for the growth of a church. Many feel the historic homes near downtown help define the character of Southern Pines. I agree. If people want to live in Southern Pines

but are unable to find a place to build or a satisfactory home to buy, what kind of pressure will that put on many of our older and historic homes? Does it not make sense that teardowns and replacement of older homes will accelerate if people can't live elsewhere? Establishing a historic district in town will probably help us hold on to some of the character and history of the town, but it ultimately cannot stop people from tearing down historic properties they buy.

If we all decide larger developments are contrary to the long term interests of Southern Pines, we are definitely making a decision as to the future growth of the town's population, which will also have an effect on nearby towns. Aside from a few hundred lots in the golf course communities, there are not that many undeveloped residential lots in town. The Pine Needles property (potentially) and a couple hundred acres on the north side of Morganton Rd are the only large tracts remaining where a housing "development" could go in. Let's say that's potentially 1,500-2,000 homes, which could mean perhaps 4,000+ more people in Southern Pines.

If, as some say, we should make all new residential properties average ½+ acre lots, that reduces the number of potential homes to maybe 300-400 and therefore less than 1,000 more people plus those on the golf courses. That 3,000+ person difference in available population growth does not mean those 3,000+ people are not going to move to the Sandhills. It just means many won't be able to live in Southern Pines. It also means many will still choose to live in Southern Pines running up the real estate market to crazier heights than it already is. If they move to Pinehurst or Whispering Pines, they will still drive to Southern Pines and Aberdeen for their shopping- creating even more congestion and pollution. Another issue is the potential gentrification/displacement of historic West Southern Pines. Note that the Pine Needles property has more acreage than all of West Southern Pines.

If we reduce the supply of potential places where people can put a business, it might keep some away, but there's also a pretty good chance it will greatly affect existing areas. Some have said retail growth in new areas will destroy businesses in downtown. I believe the kind of retail growth which would take away from downtown already happened long ago and is responsible for the current nature of downtown businesses. Growing up here, we had two hardware stores (Tate's and Parker's), a record store, a drug store, a shoe store (Sullivan's), a discount store (Pope's), and much more right downtown. Before my day, you could even buy a car downtown. Now, downtown is mostly owner-operated specialty/boutique shops which offer products and services different from what is available in the newer, highway-oriented retail districts. Is Chef Warren's really in competition with Burger King? Does Denker's worry about the clothing selection at Wal Mart? On the other hand, what might happen if retail space around town becomes scarce, causing rents to rise dramatically? Will current downtown retailers be pushed out by rising costs? Will the Country Bookstore be replaced with a Gap? Will a Subway replace Morgan Miller? Will O'Donnell's be replaced with McDonalds?

Thinking about all these retailers and restaurants brings up another issue we are already facing and which will continue to get worse. It is becoming increasingly less affordable

for workers to live in this area. As unavoidable growth does come to Moore County, where will teachers, firefighters, police officers, wait staff, housekeepers, landscapers, etc. live? Already, thousands of people drive great distances to the area every day to work in the jobs that currently exist to serve the area. As the population grows and housing costs continue to rise, more and more workers will drive in from farther away each day. If that is not sprawl and added pollution, I don't know what is. Some efforts have been made to accommodate workforce housing, but it is probably not enough and it is certainly not happening in Pinehurst and Whispering Pines where most of the recent population growth has come from. As an employer, I can attest to the fact that the majority of job applicants, even for positions offering potential for over \$15/hour come from outside Moore County. Rising housing costs brought on by a tight market would contribute to demographic change and displace or exclude an important segment of our population.

We cannot stop people from moving to Moore County. The best we can do is try to manage that population growth with the highest quality development we can and with realistic thinking as to what will work best for the greater community. No matter what town or unincorporated area in southern Moore County one lives in, we are very much in the same community. What happens in a nearby town will affect us. Whatever we try to deflect towards another town will still affect us-and possibly more. The specific details of the current Pine Needles proposal are nowhere near being final at this point and probably won't be for quite some time. The real issue before us is the fact that aside from a small amount of infill, the Pine Needles property and the area along Morganton Rd. are all that are left for substantial residential and commercial development in town. Attempting to stop community change and growth through exclusive zoning may be no more effective than trying to stop a leaky roof by using a thimble to catch the water. Does the roof stop leaking and is your home protected once the thimble fills with water?

It is my hope we can get past much of the fear-mongering, anonymous internet communications, and NIMBYism and address the realities of the situation we face and the future of our community. Higher density is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if it can help buffer the effects of the population growth that **will** happen. "Sprawl" is caused by attempts at decreasing density, not increasing it. A lot more people are coming here and we need to look at the big picture to see how we can minimize their impact on our very special community. As the County seems to have no real plans for zoning and infrastructure to deal with this massive population growth, the municipalities with our higher densities and higher levels of services will be forced to bear the brunt of it. It is how we accommodate this growth, not how we try in vain to stop it, which will set the course the future of our wonderful community.

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