

A Morning at the Commissioners Retreat- "Water" 'bout it?"

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

I spent a couple of hours this morning (1/27) at the Senior Enrichment Center attending a retreat for the Moore County Commissioners.

It appears the Commissioners are looking at the feasibility of taking another penny or two off the County property tax rate. It looks like they can do that for a couple of years, but will need to raise rates again once or twice when the funds set aside to pay off the debt service run out. If they leave rates the same, the numbers say we'll be able to pay off our debts without having to play with rates down the road.

Which is better: a steady tax rate with long term sustainability or rates constantly going up and down?

There were a couple of speakers there to talk about water and sewer infrastructure and agreements. Southern Pines and Aberdeen are in the process of renegotiating contracts with the County to sell water to the County system. Southern Pines is interested in selling up to one million gallons a day to the County via the interconnection in Pinehurst.

Lately, there has been a lot of conversation about "regionalization" of our water supply. Depending on how you define the term, either we in Moore County have a regional system or we don't. We're certainly not "regional" if you define it as having all utility assets owned and controlled by one entity. On the other hand, we do have a number of interconnections and local agreements to the point where water can flow, often both ways, between Harnett County, the East Moore Water District, Southern Pines, Aberdeen, Pinehurst, Seven Lakes, Whispering Pines and places in between .

While we do have the minimum and most important (interconnection) framework for a "regional" system, we don't necessary have a very productive regional dialogue to ensure that Moore County has a strong and effective water future. Check that. We're 70% there. For the last year and a half, the Water Task Force subcommittee of the Moore County Summit has been meeting to discuss cooperation and coordination on providing water for Moore County's future. Attended by elected and appointed officials from almost every municipality, there has been a strong dialogue and a commitment to fair cooperation between local governments.

Unfortunately, the County has rarely attended meetings throughout 2009 and into 2010. Instead, they have decided to cease participation in the third-party-sponsored (Moore County Chamber of Commerce, Pilot, Pinehurst Civic Group) Moore County Summit and essentially duplicate it except for the fact that the new process will be owned and run at the pleasure of the County Commissioners. Apparently, a neutral forum comprised of participants from all Moore County local governments is just not going to cut it with County officials.

As Southern Pines' elected representative to the Summit's Water Task Force, I can tell you firsthand how wonderfully all the municipalities have gotten along and worked through our differing wants and needs. The spirit of cooperation and mutual respect is quite evident among all who attend. Why then, if we have something working so well, would the County pull out and try to start its own version of the group? The only thing that makes sense is that they want to control the process. They want to be the ones to call meetings, set agendas, and "own" the process. The elected decision makers are already working together via the Summit. Only the County has bailed out.

Local government is here to serve you, the resident. How well are we served by our county government if they pull out of a proven and productive process just so they can start their own and be in control of the gavel? Southern Pines doesn't NEED to be part of these water talks. Southern Pines doesn't NEED to sell water to outside customers to make our system viable and water affordable. Once our reservoir goes online next year, we should be in good shape with water in Southern Pines through complete build out of the town. We participate, because it is the right thing to do. As county residents, we want to do what we can to help others while still protecting our ability to provide water to our first priority- Southern Pines and existing customers. We're not playing games or storming out of the room. Why is the County abandoning the process and does it serve county residents well?

Chris Smithson