

June 22, 2022
Infrastructure Improvements

At last Thursday's Highlands Town Board meeting, commissioners passed a 27.3-million-dollar budget for this coming fiscal year. I hope that budget number increases by September. Let me explain, I'm not talking about more spending or a tax increase.

In May, the Town submitted grants to the State for funding several important infrastructure projects. We submitted a grant for replacing an aging water pre-clarifier tank and the refurbishing of a pump station at the water plant. We are requesting about 4.75 million dollars for this grant project. Another grant was submitted for replacing an aging two-inch galvanized water line on Dog Mountain and for the replacement of a small, undersized water tank. This grant request is for 3.4 million dollars. If we are awarded both grants the town would receive over 8 million dollars from the state. As a result, the board would have to recognize the funding and add it to the budget. So, instead of a 27.3-million-dollar budget, it could be several million dollars more.

Now I am not sure about what revenue the grants will generate. Our staff believes we have submitted strong applications and have demonstrated a critical need for support. But the grants are competitive and there is no guarantee they will be funded. It is very likely we could receive partial funding from the state. In that case the town would have to cover the remainder in order to complete the projects. Partial funding, say 4 or 5 million, would be better than no funding at all. A lot of infrastructure funding is now available. Highlands simply wants a fair share.

Earlier this year we allocated our portion of the American Rescue Plan funds toward replacing an aging two-inch waterline on Moorewood Drive. The good news is that project is now completed, and residents should be back on line with a new six-inch water line. Several years ago, the town completed a similar project on Split Rail. We will continue our program of replacing the aging two-inch waterlines in the system.

There are several updates on road projects involving NCDOT and the town. Plans are moving forward to pave Big Bear Pen from Upper Lake Road down to Chestnut Street. NCDOT has completed two environmental impact studies and are in the final stages of designing the project. It will be several months before construction gets underway. The town will have to coordinate with NCDOT in relocating town utilities.

Our town staff recently talked with NCDOT officials about the short unpaved section from Upper Lake to Bowery Road. The unpaved section is a state road. The DOT folks indicated they would be open to giving that road section to the town so paving could continue to Bowery. Many years ago, when the town limits were expanded out to the Bowery area, that section was never converted to a town road. There are several other small, unpaved state roads, such as a section of Wingina, that might also fall under the same consideration. The rationale for paving unpaved roads has been to minimize erosion and sedimentation in our water impoundment areas.