

Subject: A Possible Future for Highlands
August 30, 2023

At the community coffee this past Friday, I presented several ideas about future challenges facing our mountain community, and my presentation was followed by good discussions. I also let folks know that while I was an exhibitor at the Mountain Top Rotary Art and Craft Show this weekend, folks could come by my tent and talk about town issues. Several people did. We had very productive discussions. The show was a great success also.

I began my coffee presentation by acknowledging the recent article in *Travel and Leisure* about Highlands being the best small mountain town. Yes, and as a result, more will come, and many will decide to live here. The big challenge for Highlands will be to make wise decisions for measured growth, a sustained economy, and controlled development.

While I have always acknowledged Highlands has a thriving tourist economy, I have also emphasized that we are much more. We have been a retreat community with a core of dedicated residents and thriving neighborhoods. I do not want us to lose that community dynamic by alluring economic prospects and by simply attracting more transient tourists.

Highlands, at its founding, was a retreat community, a refugee from the excessive summer heat, malaria, and other maladies found in lower elevations. In the early 1900's we had a tuberculosis retreat and treatment center. It was thought this climate and high altitude could provide healing and relief. At my coffee, I emphasized the article in *Travel and Leisure* will probably inspire folks to permanently relocate to Highlands as a "climate retreat." This sweltering summer across the nation underscores my prediction for the Highlands Plateau becoming a refuge from continuing crippling temperatures. The prospect for Highlands is to thrive in the coming years, not regress.

I also brainstormed with those in attendance about possible changes. For instance, several years ago, there was a strong blowback about adding more trees to the downtown area. With impending higher temperatures, it may be time to reconsider creating a tree canopy in the business district as towns such as Greenville have done. I also threw out the idea of even eliminating center aisle parking on Main Street in order to make wider sidewalks for cafe dining, as well as enhancing the shopping experience. Those 70 center parking spaces might be relocated to adjacent parking platforms or extending parking down from 3rd Street to 1st Street. For my friends who cherish center parking free of trees, don't get excited, I suggested revisiting an idea; I did not reveal a completed plan by the "Highlands Illuminati."

At the coffee, I covered other issues, such as the need for childcare and workforce housing. I was candid in that I do not see the town going it alone when it comes to developing workforce housing. It must be addressed in partnership with the county, state, and private sector. Amazingly, since the coffee, I have been made aware of several folks with resources who are willing and very serious about the community moving forward in addressing this issue. While I have been skeptical in the past of finding solutions for childcare and workforce housing, maybe people and organizations will bring a fresh, innovative approach to these critical needs that truly challenge the future of our economy and the cohesiveness of our society. I hope the conversation and brainstorming will continue.