

The Process of Change

The governmental process can be slow, and as some have observed in Highlands, we do it cautiously and painstakingly deliberate. At the business roundtable last Thursday night, that concern was expressed: Highlands needs to be dynamic and open to change. But, as elected representatives of the town residents, the mayor and board members need to always take a deliberate and critical analysis approach to adopting new town policies and committing tax dollars to projects.

The notion that the mayor and board should be looking at what other towns like Aspen, Blowing Rock, Asheville, and Brevard are doing to see new directions and business models also came to the forefront. I, for one, do that.

All weekend, I pondered and reflected on these ideas about seeking guidance and following the lead of other tourist communities. The converse may be applicable too; some communities may look to what we do in Highlands as a model for sustained economic practices and measured development.

For the record, I have visited several resort communities across the county. I use these visits to see what other similar communities do compared to Highlands. I always come away appreciating what other towns do, but I also hold to my conviction that Highlands, with all our rich history and tradition, should remain as the Highlands that residents love and our visitors enjoy. We are as much a retreat community as a tourist community. What do I mean by a retreat community? People continue to retreat here to escape the hustle and bustle of metropolitan areas and jammed-pact tourist towns. Our robust neighborhoods with new multimillion-dollar homes and high resale prices are also major components of our overall economy. As I want to engage with folks in the business community, I also hope the board will engage with folks living in our neighborhood communities, whether those residents are full-time or seasonal.

Last weekend, when Highlands had a rather full downtown, Sallie and I visited friends and family in downtown Asheville. Yep, I was taking notes and left with a few impressions. Both Asheville and Highlands enjoy a robust tourist clientele. We both have great downtown restaurants and watering holes.

But there are something's I do not want to see come from Asheville to Highlands. The downtown density is heavy, and parking is challenging and not cheap like here. But it is time for Highlands to consider charging for parking in certain areas. We parked in an unstaffed, non-metered Asheville parking lot. How did we pay? Sallie simply scanned a QR code on her iPhone that took her to a parking app. We entered our car tag number and paid with a credit card. Since we spent about 6 hours downtown, we paid, like so many others, about \$30. Hey, I had a creative moment. Maybe that is what Highlands should do on our highly desirable Main Street parking spaces, do QR code metering. To balance and distribute parking, back streets like Oak, 2nd, and 3rd could remain free parking.

Now, I know some will say, look at that greedy mayor's scheme to get more money for the town. Yes, I am embracing a benevolent, entrepreneurial idea. Direct the parking revenue toward improvements to downtown. For instance, the comprehensive plan proposes parking decks around Oak Street. Use parking revenue for that goal, or replacement of the aging trees on Main Street?

By the way, there are some things that other towns like Asheville do that I am absolutely against for Highlands. Those little cocktail bicycle contraptions they have where partygoers pedal around downtown pedaling, listening to cool music, and drinking simultaneously do not conform with the style of this little mountain community. Nor do I support the fad of creating social drinking districts like Franklin, Sylva, and Bevard have done. Such a district might be great for those towns, but with our center isle parking on Main Street and the existing heavy traffic periods, I don't see it for Highlands. And I am not uninformed. I have attended presentations and discussed the matter with other municipal and state officials at conferences. A social drinking district is a complicated process and not for every town.

I'm also working on creative approaches to workforce housing. Inevitably, Highlands will change and do things differently, but let us make changes deliberately and with care.