Before last Thursday's town retreat, I conducted a personal town assessment by reading the Highlands Community Plan again. The board of commissioners completed and adopted the plan in June 2022.

Some folks may think it was a document done as a state requirement and then shelved and forgotten. A comprehensive plan like the one we have should be a guiding document for the town's planning and decision-making. On the other hand, it is not a rigid rule book of statutes and regulations.

I took notes as I reviewed the Highlands Comprehensive Plan, and at the opening of the retreat, I shared them with staff and the commissioners.  I was actually surprised that almost everything on the retreat agenda was in some way connected to the plan.

The plan had some key overarching points about what the town should address in the future.  For instance, environmental preservation was at the top of the list, followed by maintaining a vibrant downtown.  Expanding and upgrading infrastructure was a major point of concern, as well as controlling STRs.  Improving and increasing green spaces and parks was seen as a priority, as well as historic preservation.   Promoting new businesses like shops and restaurants made the list, as well as community activities and special events.  Sidewalks and crossing improvements were priorities.  And, as always parking was on the list, and also housing.

As the retreat progressed, I noted how so many issues reviewed directly connected to the community plan.  For instance, the commissioners got an update about the status of the Mirror Lake dredging project, which I view as an environmental preservation project.

The board approved the installation of the town's new pedestrian crossings on US 64 and discussed adding new sidewalks, as has been done since the plan’s adoption.

A lengthy discussion at the retreat was about major infrastructure projects.  We have a major initiative to upgrade the electrical grid, as well as upgrades in water and sewer.  A big and costly project that has top priority is upgrading the force main sewer line on US 64.  That project that is key to preserving the environment can’t be postponed for another year.  The town will have to allocate 1.4 million dollars for this project.

A discussion of the future of the Highlands Playhouse highlighted how certain goals and priorities can sometimes conflict.  A year ago, an architectural firm conservatively estimated it would cost 2.6 to 2.8 million dollars to restore and bring the Playhouse up to code.  The big question at the retreat was whether that money or even more, should be spent to save the Playhouse.  The PAC is about to launch a campaign to add a small theater at their state-of-the-art facility.  One question is, would private funds be better spent on the PAC initiative than the Playhouse?  Another question is, if the Playhouse is removed, how should that property be repurposed?  Create a small park and green space area.  That effort would be consistent with the community plan, just as historic preservation is also.  Or should the property become a parking lot, also a goal cited in the plan?  There will be a public process to address these issues in the coming months.  The overarching goal should be what is the best course of action for the Highlands community, not just for one or two groups.

There were parking issues covered at the retreat.  One major item was converting the diagonal parking on 4th Street to parallel parking.  That plan would improve pedestrian and vehicular safety, but about 8 parking spaces would be lost.  What is the best decision?  I fall on the safety side.

On the other hand, our staff will consult with the state about converting the space on the curve near South Street to additional parking.  That effort could reduce the loss of parking space.  The community plan states the town has 962 public parking spaces.  The parking changes on 4th Street will still keep parking above 950 parks.

The goals and issues cited in the Highlands Community Plan will continue to provide guidance as the town board sets priorities for the forthcoming budget.  It will take several years if ever, to fully address all the issues and meet the challenges of a dynamic community like ours.