

I want to express my gratitude to all who participated in the public hearing on STR amortization last Thursday. Your input was invaluable in our understanding of this complex issue. The next crucial step will be the board's decision at the regular meeting on September 19.

After the meeting, I received an email thanking me for changing my position on STRs. My response is that I haven't changed my position. I want to limit and, over time, diminish the number of STRs in R1 and R2. The one difference I have with several board members is how to realize that goal. Instead of an amortization amendment to the current STR ordinance, I believe strict enforcement using available tracking software is the best option. The provision requiring a grandfathered property in R1 and R2 to continue STR operations for 12 months or lose the grandfathered status will, over time, reduce the number of STRs in those zones. I also believe that economic factors will eventually change the number of STRs.

On the other hand, the amortization option will trigger a court battle, the outcome of which will be in doubt. Another possible outcome may be that the NC legislature may pass preemptive legislation limiting towns' ability to regulate STRs in residential zones. This would take away the Town's ability to set its own standards.

Let's address three recurring themes presented at the hearing: Property rights, voting, and STRs as the primary economic driver.

First was the notion that a homeowner has unrestrained property rights to do whatever they want with their property. My comments here are that this may be the case in remote, unincorporated areas, but Highlands has zoning-limited permitted uses in designated zones. Property owners have rights under these zoning ordinances and can appeal issues before the zoning board of adjustment, the town board, and, in extreme cases to the courts. I believe our fifty years of zoning ordinances have shaped the development of Highlands into an attractive and highly desirable community. Folks have options like living in a gated community, a country club, or a zoning-free area where property owners can do anything with their land.

The second theme promoted by some was that they can not vote in Highlands on town leadership, but they have to pay taxes on the property they own in the Town. In that regard, allow me to say that State law states full-time residency determines whether a property owner can vote in a community. If property ownership was the voting qualification, some people at the hearing might be voting in multiple venues nationwide. They would have a super voter status of being able to vote in, let's say, the Georgia governor's race and then also voting in North Carolina, Nevada, or anywhere they own property.

The third theme was that several speakers put forth the notion that the recent proliferation of STRs has made this Town economically successful and that the loss of STRs in R1 and R2 will plunge the Town into an economic crisis where shops on Main Street will be boarded up, and no high-end restaurants will exist. That notion is nonsense. Highlands was in a strong economic position long before this recent STR trend. Highlands had a strong economic position well before I arrived here 25 years ago. I have observed a continuously expanding economy along with some dips as the nation's economy has had, like in 2009. Whether we continue to have 200 or fewer STRs in residential districts or not, Highlands will continue to be in a strong economic position. With this beautiful scenery and cool temperatures, people will continue to come to Highlands. STRs did not make this Town, and I do not believe they will save it. The permanent and seasonal residents will play a key role in the future of Highlands along with our flow of visitors.

Let me make three final points. First, to overcome a shortage of hotel guest rooms, I have advocated for more hotel rooms in Highlands instead of STRs. My good friend Pat Allen warned that if we eliminate STRs, a hotel like Motel 6 may be built in Highlands. While that may concern some, I welcome a hotel with lower rates coming to Highlands. Such an option would help young people who are coming more frequently to this ever-growing wedding destination. Our high-end hotels have limited capacity and, along with the STRs, charge premium rates. So, a Motel 6 or LaQuinta Inn might just be what is needed in our business zones.

Second, I am not against STRs in commercial zones, as they are currently permitted. Third, I would be in favor of creating STR corridor zones. For instance, I support amending the current ordinance to permit STRs on US 64, NC28, and NC 106 for properties currently zoned R1 and R2. The requirement I would support must include that the residences have a driveway and NCDOT curb that directly accesses these state highways.

The subject of STRs can be a divisive issue, but it does not have to be if we work together to find compromising solutions that benefit the entire community.