

I am not a Facebook user, but one of my colleagues told me that last week it was buzzing with outrage about the new hotel under construction on the old Bank of America property, as well as the demolition of the Highlands Playhouse building and the Bill's Soda Shop property on the corner of Main and Fourth Streets.

I was informed that some Facebookers were calling for me and my fellow board members to be voted out of office on the basis that we should have never allowed these community development atrocities to happen. These critics believe that the mayor and commissioners have absolute discretionary power to decide what is allowed to be built and operated in the town of Highlands. I like to call that view the "Boss Hog" government model. The truth is that is not how the system works. State statutes and town development ordinances regulate development within the municipal limits of Highlands. Those development decisions are not at the sole discretion of elected officials.

Regarding the new hotel, those state statutes and town ordinances were followed, although some may contend they were inadequate to prevent such a project from being approved. On the other hand, those folks requesting approval of the proposed project, especially their legal representatives, have been assured that the approval process and statutory compliance were followed correctly.

For the record, the approval process required review by the planning and zoning boards, not the town board. That decision by the town board not to review the project was not arbitrary, but rather part of the process spelled out in the town's development and zoning ordinances.

Some Facebook critics said the new hotel will have the appearance of an ugly chain hotel, I guess like Motel 6 or Red Roof. Really? The investors for a hotel development that may cost \$40 million or more dollars will build an ugly, unattractive hotel? I suspect not. For the rates they will have to charge, I am certain their facility will be very attractive and, dare I say, luxurious. They will be operating in a very competitive marketplace. My limited understanding of business and economics leads me to believe the developer can't invest millions of dollars in construction and then charge Motel 6 rates.

A major critique of the project is that it is too big and just not the right fit for Highlands. I was on Main Street on Saturday near Calder's Coffee Shop. I looked back at the Old Edwards Inn and was surprised. That facility might also be viewed as massive, probably larger than the proposed hotel. The OEI complex is on a large footprint. I'm certainly not criticizing OEI; they have invested and done a wonderful job in historically preserving the Old Edwards Inn. But in some sloped areas, that building exceeds the 35-foot maximum building height. For that matter, a number of homes in Highlands meet the 35-foot requirement on one side only to have a higher side on a slope. To make the 35-foot requirement apply to all sides of a building in this mountainous topography would result in some rather unusual architectural designs.

I also suspect the high cost of building in Highlands was correlated with the size of the new hotel. Certainly, the developers evaluated the construction costs, size, scope, and potential return on their investment. But I don't know for sure, since I wasn't involved in any aspect of planning or permitting for the building. The only thing I told one of the developers was to develop a plan that they believed met all the zoning and code requirements, and the town's review process. I did promise that the town process would provide an approval or denial in a timely manner, which was done.

As for the demolition of the Playhouse and Soda Shop properties, I know there are sentimental associations with their past uses, but the buildings had outlived their functionality. Especially regarding the Playhouse, there had been concerns for years about its safety in hosting large public gatherings. The town had studied the issue, brought in outside experts, and decided the millions of dollars that would be required to bring the Playhouse up to code outweighed its preservation and repurposing. The private owner of the soda shop property reached a similar conclusion regarding that corner property.

While I am an advocate of planned development and zoning, I also believe in property rights and equal protection under the law. If a property owner meets all the town's development requirements, they have the right to use their property as they wish. And yes, that will inevitably bring change to the community. Frankly, that process has been ongoing in Highlands since its founding.