

In a 4 to 1 vote, the town board decided to move forward with the amortization amendment to the current STR ordinance. While I advocated for a more cautious approach to reducing STRs in R1 and R2 by stricter enforcement of the grandfathering provision, I will support the board's decision.

Nevertheless, that decision will put the town in uncharted and possibly stormy waters in the coming months. The board's consensus was to decide what was best for the community, regardless of possible legal opposition. The four commissioners voting for amortization believe the town has a legally defensible position.

I expect litigation from those who advocate STRs in residential areas. I won't be surprised if the state legislature intervenes with a preemptive law in the forthcoming long session. In the meantime, those property owners who have been grandfathered will be able to continue their STR operations for the next three years.

As the board held a final review of the STR amortization amendment, I was impressed with statements made by Commissioners Patterson and Stiehler. After listening to both sides of the argument at the public hearing, and as Commissioner Stiehler noted that he had read all the email statements, both commissioners made articulate statements as to why they would vote for amortization. After listening to them I realized that they passionately and sincerely believed their vote would be in the best interest of the future of Highlands.

Some will still contend that amortization will have a disastrous impact on the community. Time will tell. But I suspect it may have the reverse effect. Some realtors worry about declining home sales because of amortization, but potential buyers may want to live in a community where STRs have not proliferated in neighborhoods. They may like the certainty of living in a community with zoning codes that allow for a variety of uses, but in specific, designated areas.

Let me again address an issue I have always supported: the construction of more hotels in Highlands within business zones. Several folks sent me emails expressing their exasperation with me for stating a Motel 6 in Highlands would be fine with me. To be specific, I mean that I would like to see hotels and motels in or near the town. Visitors need lodging options that currently do not exist. Even with amortization, STR options would be available in commercial zones and outside the town limits in the township.

Highlands used to have lodging options when we had the Hampton Inn and Mitchells Motel. Both these facilities have been converted to other uses. Hampton Inn, aka Highlands Inn, has recently had its facilities upgraded and now is a very nice hotel facility that is more toward the higher scale clientele. Mitchell's Hotel was purchased by OEI, and it is now being used as an employee housing facility

and, therefore, is no longer available for public accommodations.

The lack of affordable hotel rooms has become problematic for the town, some visitors, and maybe even some businesses. For instance, when there was a major storm, the town could bring in private electrical crews to help our electric department quickly get the power back online. Or, more recently, bring crews in to perform upgrades on the electric grid or for other infrastructure projects. These workers would stay at Mitchells or the Hampton, but not anymore, as the closest motels are in Dillard, Clayton, and Franklin. For some private companies contemplating working for the town, this lack of lodging is a potential deal breaker.

So yes, I am for more hotels in Highlands with a range of price options. It would be good for our visitors whether they are here for a destination wedding or here to work.

As for more near-term plans and my wishes for adding hotel rooms in Highlands, there are several possibilities. I hope OEI will consider renovating Mitchell's Motel and once again welcome tourists. A second opportunity is for a hotel next to the old Helens Barn site. The town board gave the Roberts family the initial go-ahead to build there several years ago. Other areas where I can see possibilities for more hotel rooms would be the property next to the post office and also across the street at the old bank site next to the fire station. The Old Creek Lodge property, which is several acres, might also be once again developed into a lodging facility.

I will happily work with anyone who wants to increase room capacity in the town's commercial zones. More beds would be good for the downtown business.