

Two weeks ago, the Macon County Board of Commissioners held two hearings. One was on a proposed redistricting of the county. The second was a proposal to replace the county planning board and appoint a new one.

I was delighted to see a nice delegation of Highlanders at the hearings. But more than just Highlanders, there was a good cross-section of residents from all areas of Macon County. Concerned citizens from Franklin, Iotla, Elijah, and Cartoogechaye, Nantahala were there just to name a few. Commissioners Patterson, Weller, and Tate attended and spoke at the hearing, along with Freda Bennett and John Muir, a member of the Highlands Planning Board.

All the speakers at the redistricting hearing touched on common concerns. First, everyone thought the process should be slowed and be more deliberate. The recurring question was why the rush? Second, the consensus was that options for creating a new districting map needed to be explored. Why just have three districts? How can the county be redistricted to provide more representation from various districts and different communities in this big county?

Another surprise for me was that many speakers seemed open to the idea of each district electing its representative rather than having a countywide election of commissioners at large. For example, the state legislature is formed by districts; why can't a county do the same?

I, like other speakers, urged the commissioners to carefully study redistricting options. I suggested that consultants from the NC School of Government advise the county on opinions consistent with state statutes. Others said that the state board of elections might need to weigh in and advise the county. Maybe a task force of consulting advisors could work with a panel of county citizens to develop proposals and options for redistricting.

The county commissioners pointed out that if the proposed redistricting were approved by the board, it would need to go to the local legislative delegation for state approval. That is one way of redistricting, but the residents at the hearing seemed to want to explore the second choice: a county referendum. The referendum option is in the state's general statutes. I suspect our legislative delegation would be happy to defer action to the will of the voters. Several speakers stressed that redistricting was for the voters, not for the benefit of the sitting commissioners.

At the end of the hearing, Chairman Young expressed similar views about creating maps that provided options for redistricting. I hope the county board will now put in place a process to develop options that citizens expressed at the public hearing.

My first idea is to create more districts of smaller populations so more communities like Highlands have a voice on the county board. Why not have a seven-member commission with 6 districts? Each district could elect its representative. The other commissioner could be elected by all voters to serve as chair of the commission, like a mayor in a city council structure. But that is just my idea; I am sure others have their views, which should also be fully reviewed.

The second hearing was for the reorganization of the county planning board. I was one of two speakers at this hearing. I urged the commissioners to continue to allow the towns of Franklin and Highlands to appoint a voting member for the county planning board. I emphasized that our towns have high-density residential areas and are centers of county businesses and jobs. What happens in county areas affects the towns. The towns need a voice in county land use and planning. When it was stated that the county does not have members on the town planning board, I pointed out that town residents pay both municipal and county taxes. Both town planning boards have members who do not live inside the towns.

Regrettably, the county commissioners voted to reconstitute the county planning board with five voting members from the county. The towns will have the option to have liaisons to the planning board. One county commissioner pointed out that the planning board did not need to have voting members from the towns where restrictive zoning ordinances were in place. I got the message that fewer land use restrictions are preferred, like the idea of filling in flood plain areas for commercial and private development.

On Thursday Night, February 19, a town workshop will be held at 6 pm, followed by a board meeting at 7 pm. The meeting has a full agenda. See you there; it can also be viewed on the town website.