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| A recent email from a resident was addressing the issue of workforce housing. Attached to the email was an article that called for a reduction in building code requirements and density standards as a strategy to increase housing supply. I get information from folks all the time and many ideas or suggestions to consider in depth about a particular issue or challenge. Let me share my thoughts about the workforce housing crisis.First let me note Highlands has had zoning ordinances since the 1970s. Yes, some folks think our zoning may be too restrictive, but I contend they have been an asset in town planning and development, resulting in an attractive and organized townscape. I would be very reluctant to make wholesale changes to zoning ordinances, but rethinking multi-family zoning may be in order, especially near business districts.  By comparison, Macon County does not have zoning like Highlands, but rather some general land use policies. Put another way, building a home or subdivision outside the town limit is more flexible and open.Macon County and Highlands both follow the NC Building Codes standards. If the state were to change them, the town and, I'm sure, the county would follow. Even in the hurricane rebuild period, counties still require temporary or permanent structures to follow these state codes.The concept behind building codes has been occupancy safety. There are routine accounts of house fires due to improper electrical wiring, gas lines not up to code, and structural collapses, especially decks, due to installation not meeting code. The issues of structures withstanding storms, snow loads, and high winds are code considerations that can not be sacrificed for expedient building practices, no matter the good intention.Also, our lot size and density requirements are based on and driven by state watershed and erosion control ordinances. These rules apply to both the town and the county. The county is now reviewing floodplain and erosion ordinances. This review is very poignant given the recent loss of homes from Helene in floodplain areas.The state watershed requirements that set density levels have been important drivers in protecting the critical watershed here in this unique mountain environment. Here again, I would be very concerned if the state were to make major changes to these statutes.The recently released Macon County Housing Study is very comprehensive. It addresses a multitude of issues related to developing affordable workforce housing and related issues about worker commutes and possible housing locations.A big issue in the study is how to build lower-priced housing for the workforce, especially where the salaries, especially in the hospitality area, are significantly below state averages. For instance, many low-paying workers’ salaries would only support paying rents below $1,000 a month. On the other hand, planned workforce units like the ones recently proposed at the hospital would average about $300,000 to $350,000 a unit. Without some subsidy the numbers don't work. For that matter, the average price for a home in Franklin, for example, is over $300,000. To pay for a mortgage at that price, a worker, or two workers with a combined income, would have to make about $160,000 a year to carry a mortgage and not be financially house distressed.Also, how can the high land and building costs be addressed? For instance, the few remaining lots in Highlands ranging from a half to a full acre are going from $500k to 1 million. Building costs are around $800 to $1000 a square foot. How do we get our limited number of contractors to build at the lower costs of workforce housing? The housing study also emphasized that this area has a shortage of builders and tradespeople needed to build 600 or 700 units in the county just to catch up to the projected shortage in the next few years. It is a major challenge. Also, throw STRs into the mix; long-term rental units are also almost nonexistent and going for a premium rental rate. We have a circular pattern that goes like this. Businesses say we need more tourists. STRs are critical to countering the lack of hotel rooms, so what could be workforce rental units go to addressing tourist housing. Government officials are told the workforce housing situation, which has been in part by the tourist industry, has to be addressed if more economic growth is to happen. Not only is permanent housing expected for the Highlands Plateau, but housing for seasonal workers is also required, according to the housing study. It is a complex needs matrix that must be sorted out and analyzed. I think unlimited growth for the area may be welcomed by some in the business community, but I am not sure it will benefit the long-term outlook and preservation concerns held by many. The housing study points out that one of the biggest areas of growth in housing with be with folks 65 or older, retirees seeking a retreat from high density, hustle and bustle, rushed metropolitan life. Another realistic question is how much the town can address housing. The town limits of Highlands comprise 6.5 square miles. Much of the land is distressed or even steeply sloped, with most of the buildable lots already developed. So, the actual town can’t accommodate many new units. The housing study emphasized that this housing problem must be a countywide initiative.The solution starts with partnerships with the state, county, towns, building industry, and business folks. I, for one, think the federal government will have to step up its involvement to address this growing national problem.Now, some folks will be upset with me after reading this piece, contending I need to be an advocate and find solutions to this housing crisis. My response is that there needs to first be a sober and realistic assessment of the issue. As I stated at the Macon County Housing Study presentation that was conducted here in Highlands, this problem can be solved with cooperation, hard work, and about 150 to 200 million dollars. I will get to work on it by talking to other stakeholders.  Now, where will the money come from?  |

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