

During the holidays, I reflected on where our town of Highlands has been and what lies ahead for it. Let me share some general observations about the ‘State of the Town.’

First, we have seen a lot of changes in Highlands this past year, some of which will continue to be works in progress. Specifically, there are several building projects that, for some, are unsettling. I hear it a lot: this or that project just isn't proper or doesn't fit the Highlands look. This may be so, but I look back over the last 25 years I have been here and remember that mantra being directed toward many projects that are now part of the community. Okay, the Alamo building – where the improv once was, and Primary is now—may be the exception, but saving the Bird Barn just wasn't feasible. For new residents, the Bird Barn was a wooden barn-like building where Four 76 Pizza is now located on Main Street.

Second, we will see the conclusion of several infrastructure projects in 2026, while others will continue. The Dog Mountain Water Project will be completed early in the year. The inclusive playground project will begin at the start of the year and be completed by early June. As for ongoing projects, the remaining phases of the Mirror Lake Dredging Project will begin this year and will continue well into 2027. Also on the project schedule are the upgrade of the main sewer line on Franklin Road and a fourth electric circuit to the business district, both projects to be completed later this year.

There will be continuing work on several private projects, like the new hotel at the old Bank of America property and the new Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church. The renovation of Wolfgang's into the Town Hall Restaurant should be completed early this year, and the new Town Hall restaurant will be in operation.

I am pulling for the green light to begin construction of a Boys and Girls Club building at the Highlands Recreation Center. Having the Plateau Boys and Girls Club in operation in Highlands will be a real game-changer for the community.

Highlands is in a strategic position to embrace the future. Several things drive my optimistic vision of what lies ahead for the community. We have a strong infrastructure system that the residents have invested in for decades. Fortunately for Highlands, unlike many WNC communities, we have sustainable water, sewer, electric, and road systems. For example, Cashiers will face millions of dollars in investment to meet expanding water and sewer needs.

With the emergence of AI applications, fiber optic access for everyone is essential. In recent years, there have been investments in building internet systems that make working remotely for our visitors and residents easy. The town built a fiber system, as well as private providers. The notion of a broadband desert does not exist in Highlands. Folks have multiple options to connect to anywhere in the world.

I was recently talking with my good friend and realtor, Pat Gleeson, about the future of the real estate market in Highlands. I was saying that I sensed we still have a hot market, but I was also worrying about a sudden downturn. Pat told me that while a downturn is always a possibility, he views the Highlands housing market as inherently stable against sudden market crashes. He went on to say housing in our community has a strong, long-lasting foundation where people want to invest in this wonderful mountain community.

Pat is correct, people do want to invest in our town because Highlands represents consistency, stability, and sustained value. In some respects, Highlands is a retreat investment community for many seeking to securely preserve part of their wealth.

With that retreat property investment model comes responsibility. It starts with maintaining a stable governing structure in which deliberate planning, fiscal responsibility, and consistent rules and ordinances remain in place. Ironically, the resolution of the Huff vs Highlands lawsuit reflects this consistency. Yes, we had parties disagreeing over STRs, but those differences were correctly resolved through judicial and negotiated processes. Yes, there will be more work ahead, but the raging STR controversy of the past has subsided and is now less divisive.

When it comes to future economic sustainability, the town will have to continue to embrace progress. Economic development, especially with emerging AI systems, is inevitable. How we manage that development is the key issue going forward.

Finally, in the future, we must conserve and nurture community resources. We have a tremendous number of local non-profit organizations and a vast cadre of community volunteers who make many contributions to the quality and livability of Highlands. We must preserve these resources in the future. A national trend is transient mobility, but we need to hold on to Highlanders who live, work, and volunteer in our community. Someone has to “mind the store.” Quality of life and community livability have to be deliberate actions, not accidental occurrences.

Our natural and unique environment is a strategic resource that must be saved. This beautiful, even breathtaking landscape, draws people of goodwill and enterprise to the Highlands Plateau. If we trash and overdevelop this unique land, then all other community advantages will be jeopardized or rendered for naught.

It is everyone’s responsibility and challenge to ensure Highlands thrives. We are all stewards of the community. Let us work together in mutual support, respect, and, dare I say, affection for one another.