I had the honor of making a few remarks at the 150th Anniversary Toast to Highlands Party that the Highlands Chamber of Commerce sponsored at the Highlands Country Club on April 24th. The crux of my remarks was that the Highlanders that have come before us made good decisions for the community.

Those decisions began with well planned land-use. One has only to look at the original Kelsey Hutchinson map that laid out the lots and roads of Highlands to see that there was a belief of land use and town planning as revealed in the map design. That tradition continued for decades, especially with the incorporation of the town in 1883 and the adoption of town zoning in the late 1970s.

I know the is an ongoing debate as to whether our zoning is too restrictive, or for some not restrictive enough. Others may think the town is not consistent in zoning enforcement. But these issues have mostly been decided by locally elected officials, although state 160 D statues do regulate to some degree what towns in North Carolina can or can’t do. These statues for example, set the procedures that zoning boards have to follow which are standardized throughout the state.

I bring all of this up because like most mayors and town council members across the state, I havegreat concern that pending legislation at the state level could up end municipalities’ ability to do land use planning and zoning that reflects the unique needs of individual communities.

For instance, a substantial number of municipalities have passed resolutions opposing HB 765, the omnibus bill that would curtail options for local land use and zoning policies. In our county the Town of Franklin and Highlands have both passed resolutions concerning HB 765. The North Carolina League of Municipalities is also opposed to the legislation.

The end of this week may be the decisive moment. May 8, Thrusday, is the crossover day where bills in each house have to be moved over for review by the other body. If a bill fails to crossover it is then in theory stalled and can’t be considered until the 2027 session. But there are ways of getting bills around this requirement, so nothing is certain until the legislature is adjourned.

Admittedly many of these concerning bills have bipartisan support. Legislators in both parties may give their support to a bill that they believe will address the shortage of affordable housing in the state. But some provisions in these bills, such as allowing assessable dwelling units to be used as STRs, will not significantly address the shortage of workforce housing. If passed SB291 making STRs allowable in all residential zones will not help the housing problem.

In closing let me paint a picture of what might lie ahead by the end of this legislative session. One proposed bill would allow 5 housing units per acre with no occupancy limits in any residential zone. Another bill would strip towns of making parking requirements for various zones, while another would allow the discharge of firearms within town limits. So, what possibly be a problem? Five STR units per acre, no parking or occupancy limitations and gun discharging anywhere as long as the bullets do not leave the premises!

We could see a whole new townscape here in Highlands and in other cities in 2026. I hope cooler heads in Raleigh will prevail by affirming that land-use and zoning decisions are best made at the local level.