

Dollywood, a monumental tourist venue, does it, but we no longer do it. Highlands is no longer closed for the winter season. Starting after Christmas, Dollywood is shut down until the middle of March; the town pretty much stays open.

Their closure is due to several factors: weather, tourist volume, and the need for preparation. Many of their outdoor attractions would not see much use by visitors in cold temperatures. They also must repair and upgrade many of the rides and Dollywood's classic features. And of course, they plan and develop new attractions for the upcoming season during this downtime.

Highlands used to see a winter shutdown in both our business and residential areas. At one point, many stores on Main Street would paper their windows and remain closed from around November to the first of May, while many shop owners traveled during the winter or went to their second homes in warmer climates. There would be days, even on weekends, when no vehicles would be found in any numbers on Main and 4th streets.

In addition, neighborhoods had a similar pattern of vacancy. Most seasonal residents left no later than November and did not return until around May. I remember seeing Buick Roadmasters with mostly Florida tags coming into Highlands in the spring, almost dragging the rear bumper, since the vehicles were filled to the ceiling with all the essentials for running a household. Sometimes they even had a luggage rack on the roof with stacks of baggage. Not anymore, the new all-terrain SUV makes Highlands accessible all year round. While many SUVs have roof racks, they can also tow, via a trailer hitch, those little square metal contraptions where even more stuff can be tied down. When this load formation occurs, the name of these vehicles morphs into Stuffed Up Vehicles!

For several years, our utility system has been transformed by this back-and-forth seasonal migration. Our peak water demand used to take place around July Fourth, and similar patterns occurred in electric usage. Now our peaks tend to occur around Christmas, and those low-demand winter months are pretty much a thing of the past. Water, sewer, and electric usage have leveled out over the year, albeit overall demand has increased dramatically, thus the pressure to upgrade our water and electric systems.

As mayor, I embrace the technique of MBWA, that is, managing by wandering around. Almost every day, I drive around neighborhoods and downtown, making observations and finding small problems, like an American Flag at the park becoming ragged at the edges, or a pothole here and there.

I also notice traffic, parking, and pedestrian patterns in the downtown area. On most days, the downtown area wakes up, and not much activity happens until around noon. What is also interesting is that back in the old days, there was a significant thinning out of crowds and parking around 5 pm or so. Not so anymore, especially on weekends, the parking areas are full well into the evening hours with restaurant customers and hotel guests.

Another observation is that now on weekends we have people shopping downtown, of course December, but also in the other winter months. It was once thought that keeping stores open in the off-season wasn't viable, but Highlands has transitioned to a year-round season with peaks and valleys.

I am just an observer. I do converse with shop and business folks regularly. What is needed is a longitudinal business study of the downtown economy. What if the Chamber or some other organization commissioned a study that examined shopping and business patterns over a yearly

period? That information may be helpful for long-term planning of events and activities designed to support a vibrant economy in Highlands. Simply a thought.