Last Thursday, the Highlands Board members and staff, along with almost all the municipalities in North Carolina, were tracking bills in the legislative hopper that would impact our ability to execute land use and zoning policies at the local level. Thursday was crossover day, when a bill had to be passed by one legislative house to be sent to the other for passage in this biennial session. If the bill did not crossover, in theory, it was dead in the water of consideration until the next long session in 2027.

That is, in theory, the process, but as always, there are exceptions. For instance, if there is a budget expenditure component to a bill, it does not have to meet the crossover provision. Translation: a bill with a financial attachment can continue to be considered for the entire session, regardless of whether it was passed by one house on that May 8 crossover date.

A funny thing happened at the last minute as May 8 approached. HB 765, the omnibus bill curtailing municipalities' authority to regulate land use and zoning issues, was suddenly given a minor spending and appropriations amendment. Therefore, it remains in play for the duration of this session.

We are still trying to determine if the provision allowing litigants to sue local officials personally is still in the bill. If HB 765 passes and that provision to sue local officials remains and becomes law, I will resign as Mayor of Highlands. That is not a threat but a promise on my part. I also believe many local elected officials across the state will do the same. Such a provision would pretty much ensure only rich, crazy, political zealots or any combination thereof would be willing to serve as elected officials.

Other bills that I have previously referred to didn’t make the crossover. SB 291, the STR bill, was stuck in a rules committee, as well as HB 369, the parking lot bill, and SB 497, the accessory dwelling unit bill. SB 587, the bill intended to fix SB 382, which was hurriedly passed at the end of the last session, did make the crossover. It is supposed to fix the downzoning provision in the earlier bill that caused widespread concern among local officials.

For my gun enthusiast friends who were ready to begin shooting within the town limits, HB 9, which would allow firearm discharge within town limits, stalled and did not make the crossover. But, like I have said before, nothing is certain until the gavel comes down in Raleigh adjourning the legislature.

The town board meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 15. A closed session concerning the status of the Huff v Highlands lawsuit will be reviewed with the board and our attorney at a 6:30 workshop session. The board meeting will begin at 7 pm at the Highlands Community Center next to the ball field.

The major item on the agenda will be the presentation of the town budget for FY 2025/26. I expect the town manager to discuss our dwindling reserve funds and capital project needs with the board. The budget and these important capital projects can be funded this year using some reserve funds. Nevertheless, in the near term, the board will have to consider cutting back these projects and services, taking on more debt, or raising taxes and adding fees. It is a discussion that must be had. The last property tax increase in Highlands was over a decade ago, but inflation, growing demands, and post-COVID pressures have continued.

I hope to see you at the meeting. Alternatively, you can access the meeting remotely via the YouTube app posted on the town website.