

After last Thursday's long board meeting, I came away with a confirmation that I have had for quite some time. That is, Highlands has multiple pressure points when it comes to future growth and the development of the town.

During public comment, a request was made by someone who had recently purchased a building in a business zone to operate a business that is not currently permitted in that zone. The request has merit for careful consideration. The town set permitted uses for specific business zones decades ago. During that time new business models have emerged that weren't even conceived of at the time these zones were created. The town should review the current permitted uses and determine if some zones should be updated.

On the other hand, the next day, I received feedback from a constituent that they had concerns and would not favor changing the business zone to permit the use requested at the board meeting. I assured both parties that changing the use in a zone was not a fast process. Such changes have to be carefully developed by staff and the town attorney and then reviewed by the planning board. A public hearing is also required before a final vote by the board is taken.

Another pressure point is how the residential zones will develop in the context of short-term rentals. Like the business zones use, towns and HOAs with covenants developed neighborhood ordinances decades ago, even before the short-term corporate business model took off in the past few years. There is now a huge legal area emerging in attempting to update homeowner association covenants to address STRs. Like towns trying to update ordinances governing residential zones, both are problematic and filled with legal potholes.

Of course, the pressure point in Highlands is between those who see STRs as a financial investment and a property rights issue versus neighborhood residents who are concerned about the quality of life and makeup of their traditional neighborhoods. At the meeting on Thursday night, the vote by the board to hold a public hearing concerning the amortization of STR was another step in continuing the debate and controversy over short-term rentals in Highlands. As a zoning matter, the question is basically where STRs should be permitted and where they should be restricted. If the STR amendment for amortization prevails, it is almost certain the final outcome will be resolved in the courts or legislature.

Finally, at Thursday night's meeting, the board heard from citizens from a neighborhood where multiple new homes were being built. These residents were concerned about construction practices, especially the traffic flow disruption, constant noise, after-hours work, and the extended time that it is taking to finish the homes. Of particular concern was the erosion and stormwater runoff onto other properties.

These construction issues, a real pressure point, in some way, are a product of Highlands' success. More than ever, people want to live here and are willing to pay almost any price. It is a boom time for contractors, especially for construction within the town limits. The problem is that many of the residential lots available are steep slopes that pose real challenges in addressing stormwater runoff and erosion. These steep slopes pose little problem if left undeveloped and remain covered with vegetation, but those environs are now on the wane.

The town board will be holding workshops this fall to address these construction and development issues. They will also tackle the issue of updating permitted uses in business zones.

As a community, we will have to address these pressures, but by working together, they can be met.