

Subject: Balance between progress and preservation
June 7, 2022

The time after Memorial Day is a very active period for organizations in Highlands. I have had the opportunity to attend many of these events in recent weeks, and unfortunately, I have missed some also.

This past Sunday I went to the dedication of the new research teaching facility at the Highlands Biological Station. Over the past several years the Highlands Biological Foundation has raised funds to build this new research teaching facility next to Ravenel Lake.

Julia Grumbles, the past president of the Foundation, spoke at the dedication that the ultimate goal of the Highlands Biological Station and Foundation is to study, research and most definitely to preserve the unique ecology and environment on this mountain plateau, as well as the entire Western Carolina region. In fact, the Highlands Biological Station has had this commitment since its founding some nine decades ago.

I was struck by the enthusiasm of the staff, researchers and especially the volunteers and community supporters of this vital organization. It has been a community treasure that continues to have strong support in the effort to preserve this unique mountain environment.

With the growing population and expansion throughout Western Carolina, the work and research of the Highlands Biological Station is needed now more than ever. They have formed numerous partnerships with universities and area groups such as the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust and the Highlands Greenway to expand programs of advocacy for preservation.

Another related event was the program presented by the Highlands Historical Society in honoring our local historian, Dr. Ran Schaffner. Again, Ran has been an outspoken advocate for the preservation of the history and mountain culture of this unique community. He wrote the definitive history of Highlands that documents all the people and families that made this community so unique.

As Highlands inevitably develops and embraces changes driven by modern life, we must not forget our past and why so many from the past and the present have chosen to live here on this high plateau. The torch of preservation must be passed from generation to generation if what is so special about Highlands is to be retained.

It is hard to know what lies ahead for this community and region, but cautious reflection and analysis will be required. I was talking with a regional public official just last week about how certain developments can have unintentional consequences. A county nearby saw the recent spread of bitcoin mining businesses. Large warehouse facilities were converted to these dark manufacturing enterprises. The warehouses were filled with racks of computer servers that run constantly in mining bit coin. At first, these efforts were viewed as a boost to the economy, but later residents saw them as a major source of disruption. These bitcoin factories require large amounts of power and need big fan systems running constantly to cool down the servers. Residents living as far as a mile away were recently complaining at a public meeting about the never-ending hum and noise of the fans.

It gets down to a balance between economic progress and the preservation of the natural environment. Even within the realm of economic growth, counter purposes can occur. Is a noise-generating operation compatible with tourist and hospitality initiatives? It is a challenge for all of us, especially in areas where there is little, little, or no, land use plans. Many areas in Western Carolina will be facing these pressures sooner or later.