

Subject: CityVision Report
May 3, 2023

Last week I attended the annual conference of the North Carolina League of Municipalities, aka CityVision. Let me review some of the highlights.

Governor Cooper spoke at the main luncheon. I, along with other mayors and elected officials, was glad to hear the governor say that municipalities should have more autonomy in making zoning and development regulations rather than having legislators in Raleigh make those local decisions.

In fact, there was a lot of discussion among attendees about proposed bills intended to curtail the ability of towns and cities to set local zoning, land use, and development policies. The proposed bills on accessory dwelling units, Short-Term Rentals (STRs), workforce housing, and water rates were just a few of the hot topics discussed.

There will be more clarity concerning the status of bills on May 4th as it is the crossover deadline, where bills proposed by each house have to be sent to the other branch for consideration. Case in point, HB 409-Accessory Dwelling Units bill now has to crossover to the Senate. If a bill like HB 409 does not make the crossover, it is supposedly dead for this legislative session.

I used the word supposedly because as the budget moves toward finalization and legislators are ready to go home for the summer; anything can happen. I had a conversation with a League of Municipalities staff member, and he confirmed my concern. As the budget rushes toward approval, parts of stymied legislation can be quietly attached to bills on track for approval. For instance, the short-term rental lobby attempted to attach a beneficial provision for their industry at the last moment during the previous term, but watchdogs caught the move and stopped it. The problem with tracking bills in Raleigh is the sheer number. In this term, 1500 bills have been introduced.

I also attended several sessions on hot topics. One was promoted as a session on how towns can manage STR issues. A large number of elected officials were in the room, hoping to share information and learn more about how to address STRs. Instead, we received an infomercial from panelists representing major STR providers such as AirB&B. Their message was to register, permit, regulate STRs, and hold community meetings where all the issues on both sides could be resolved. Like other attendees, I said, "What?" In the brief Q&A that followed those rosy presentations, I pointed out the STR regulation roadblocks facing NC municipalities, especially since the Wilmington Court of Appeals Case. One panelist proclaimed that the NC Vacation Rental Act passed during the 1990s was adequate to address all STR issues a town would face. I begged to differ on that optimistic assumption. Many of us left the presentation very disappointed.

At roundtable discussions with other elected officials, I found we shared many common concerns. One was recruiting and retaining qualified personnel, especially in law enforcement. Almost all towns sought grants for critical infrastructure projects, especially water and sewer upgrades. Everyone had also experienced supply chain problems. And we all exchanged ideas about promoting more community involvement and facilitating better communication with our citizens.