

Subject: Comprehensive Community Plan
July 6, 2022

In a special meeting this past Thursday, the Highlands Town Board passed the Highlands Comprehensive Community Plan in a 4 to 1 vote. I wish the vote had been unanimous, but unanimous votes on big items like this plan and yearly budgets don't seem to be possible.

I appreciate Commissioners Dotson, Patterson, Pierson and Stiehler for voting yes and thereby endorsing the Highlands Comprehensive Community Plan. As I stated at the meeting, this plan did not originate from the Commissioners nor the staff. It was a product produced by the people and community stakeholders of Highlands. The Stewart Company and its experts led the community in developing this comprehensive plan over an almost 2-year period. It will serve as a guiding document in future policy decisions adopted by town leadership.

There was a sense of immediacy in voting for this plan on June 30. Under state mandate municipalities had until July 1 to approve a Comprehensive Community Plan. Failure to approve the comprehensive plan would have jeopardized Highlands' ability to enforce current zoning ordinances. While some folks may have liked to see zoning ordinances go away, I believe zoning has been keystone for planned and controlled development in Highlands for over fifty years. I am glad we didn't compromise our zoning history by failing to approve the comprehensive plan.

July 1st was also momentous in that the new town budget went into effect. While I would have been pleased if we have had unanimous approval for the budget, four commissioners did vote for the budget, thereby insuring support for a raise for town employees, a small increase in funding for the police department, and for the funding of a number of public works capital improvement projects. The question may be asked as to what would have happened if 3 commissioners had voted against the new budget. This question is not that far-fetched. In the last two county budgets the vote has been three commissioners for approval and two against.

If Highlands had failed at the June Town Board meeting to approve the current budget, a budget that had been in development with commissioner involvement since February, the default position would have been to continue town operations at the levels of the previous budget. That default position would have consequences, for instance no employee pay increases, no capital improvements like new sidewalks, paving of roads, needed equipment replacement, and no water and sewer system upgrades. The state requires that the Town Manager submit a balanced budget to the Town Board every May. Failure of the Board to take action on approving a budget is not an option in my opinion.

At the special meeting last Thursday, a public hearing was held concerning the proposed Comprehensive Community Plan. Several citizens speaking at the hearing took that opportunity to comment about short term rentals. Changes to ordinances related to short term rentals will again be presented at a special meeting on July 14, at 6 pm, at the Highlands Community Building. These changes will then be sent to the Highlands Planning Board for review at their regular meeting on July 25th. At a later date the town board will set a hearing for the proposed changes. At that hearing the public can address the proposed STR changes.

Some folks have told me that a compromise needs to be found concerning short term rentals. So far, there has been criticism from all sides of the issue directed toward town

commissioners. If there is a compromise to be found, I urge organizations like Save Highlands, the Highlands Neighborhood group, the realtors of Highlands, the Highlands Chamber of Commerce, town merchants and the tourist advocates, or any nonprofit group to come together, or put forth unilaterally, a proposed compromise concerning short term rentals. In short, what does the Save Highlands group see as a compromise position that the town should approve? What is the position of the Neighborhood group, etc.? As mayor I am open to receive proposed compromises. My only requirement is to share any compromise for full public review.