

Liberty versus Equality and Prosperity versus Community April 20, 2022

Last week I attended the Newly Elected Officials Seminar in Asheville. The event was sponsored by the University of North Carolina School of Government and the North Carolina League of Municipalities. While I was recently elected to a third term, I like to attend these events to learn about new issues and brush up on old ones.

The professors covered several important topics such as town government structures, North Carolina statutes regulating municipalities and budget planning. I learned a lot, such as reserve fund levels that other towns maintain. I was prepared in discussions to tout that Highlands maintains very high reserves, but I discovered several other nearby towns maintain budget reserve percentages equal to or even higher than we do in Highlands. The instructor emphasized that the tendency in North Carolina is for small towns to maintain higher reserve fund percentages than do larger cities.

At the end of the workshop Professor Carl Stenberg led a presentation called 'Public Choices, Public Values.' The presentation and group response focused on values that town councils have to address when making decisions about public policy. Professor Stenberg shared the Public Values Compass Model that has been created by the NC School of Government. He pointed out that public issues reflect four major public values. These public values were illustrated as if they are opposite points on a compass needle, for example, north versus south, east versus west.

The values on the opposite compass points are Liberty versus Equality in one direction and Prosperity versus Community in the other direction. When elected officials make public policy decisions these polar values can cause tensions in the decision-making process. For instance, liberty is an overall value encompassing associations of freedom, choice, opportunity, autonomy, personal responsibility, and self-sufficiency. Those treasured values can come into conflict with the values of Equality and related associations such as fairness, justice, tolerance, equal rights, diversity, equity, and a level playing field. The challenge for elected officials, and for that matter a community, is to find the right balance in making policy between these two points on the public values compass.

Another set of values at opposite points on this compass model is Prosperity versus Community. Related values of Community are safety, belonging, family, neighborhoods, tradition, security, and quality of life. These community values are sometimes contrasted with Prosperity which relates to growth, efficiency, productivity, profit, competition, privatization, return on investment, and also quality of life.

As Professor Stenberg emphasized, solving public problems requires solutions that consider these competing values. That point made me think about current issues in Highlands, especially short-term rentals. I have listened to many residents about STRs. So many of our friends and neighbors hold different values identified on the

compass model that shape their position. Some think the prime issue is liberty and property rights. Others embrace the position of community, fairness. Others want equity and a level playing field, but how that translates into policy may vary among individuals and groups. Switching to the other compass points, some residents embrace community, neighborhoods, quality of life while others support growth, productivity and return on their investment.

The challenge for the board, our elected officials, will be to strike a balance that will insure the long-term viability for Highlands. Like so many other communities, the town will have to set a direction very soon. Making no decision is not an option.