

## The Drought and Town Meeting November 14, 2023

I wish I could say it's over, but I can't. The drought and related restrictions on water use and outside burning remain in place. The small amount of rain we got over the past weekend did nothing to alleviate the crisis except give firefighters a short period to recover and reset. The forest fires continue.

Highlands will be following the lead of the North Carolina Forest Service in following the no-outside burn ban. When that state agency lifts the fire ban in Western Carolina, we will do the same. Currently, the state agency is asking citizens to report any outside burning activity by calling 911.

In Highlands, a 911 call concerning possible outside burning will trigger a response by the Highlands Police and Fire Departments. Last week, I visited with the firemen at their station. They had a door up and a fire truck on the ready. A number of firefighters were standing by, ready to respond.

The chief told me they made three calls in one day concerning possible outside burning. In another instance, a contractor crew was burning a pile of scrap wood at a building site. The police issued a citation that has a \$500 fine. That kind of reckless behavior will not be tolerated under these critical circumstances. The last thing I want to see is what happened in Gatlinburg in the previous fire ban in 2016. That community lost lives and property due to the careless actions of a few individuals.

The town continues to monitor and manage the declining water levels. I urge everyone to consciously strive to reduce their water use during this severe drought period.

Thursday night is the November meeting of the Highlands Town Board. A workshop session will begin at 6 pm, followed by the business meeting at 7 pm. The meetings will be at the Highlands Community Center.

The focus of the workshop will be to review the current weekend construction regulations. Specifically, issues such as commercial operation of leaf blower and other equipment will be covered. The staff and board will also review the commercial color chart, which was discussed at the last workshop. Keep in mind that items on the workshop agenda will not have final actions taken until a subsequent town board meeting.

On the agenda of tonight's board meeting will be yet another discussion of the Highlands Chamber of Commerce building lease. Staff from the chamber have concerns about the wording of the one-year temporary lease that the town board approved in September.

The board will also hear a report from Hotwire Communications concerning operational issues and contract commitments. The contract the town has with Hotwire requires these periodic updates.

The board will also review a proposed town street light policy that staff developed from discussions at a previous workshop. Up to this point, the town has had no formal policy concerning street light placements.

The board will also review a UDO Amendment concerning exterior commercial lighting. No final action will be taken other than calling for a public hearing on the proposed amendment.

Hope to see you at the meeting, or it can be accessed by a YouTube portal that is on the town website.