

## Highlands Tourist Challenge

A recent editorial in one of our local newspapers asked how many tourists Highlands can handle in a given period of time. Other cities across the globe are asking similar questions. In Barcelona, Spain, organized groups are now confronting tourists by squirting them with water guns and telling them to go home. Residents there are revolting against mass tourism. While I certainly do not wish to see such a situation in Highlands, the question posed by the local editorial does have merit.

Highlands has assets and factors that make this community highly desirable for transient tourists and people looking for permanent residences. I have, and still contend, that we are not just a tourist town; rather, Highlands has a long history of also being a retreat community. These days, with access to airports and unlimited broadband, people have the option of working from anywhere, even in remote Highlands. I am very much supportive of more full-time or transitional residents locating in our community. These residents are the backbone of the community.

Climate change will continue to drive people, whether tourists or those seeking permanent or transitory residence, to the Highlands Plateau. Just this month, places across the country have experienced days averaging 100 degrees or more, but Highlands remained in the low 80s. If this temperature differential remains, folks will retreat to the plateau to escape the extreme heat. Even now we are already experiencing a super-residential building boom, where houses are going up in cost by millions of dollars.

A chart recently produced by Smoky Mountain Host Network is revealing about why visitors come to Western North Carolina. Festivals, dining, and local shopping have seen modest increases in attracting visitors in the 13% range. The huge increases have been in tourists seeking to visit towns, outdoor recreation like fishing and biking at 66.7%, visiting historic sites at 46.7%, and, unfortunately, in my opinion, motorcycle riding at 66.7%. The two biggest attractors are hiking 73.3% and nature viewing 100%. All this data informs me that Highlands is strategically positioned to be a tourist destination and a place to retreat to and relocate permanently—all good news.

But I also see challenges that go back to the recent editorial about how much tourism the community can handle. The traditional economic model is based on

an ever-expanding market where more and more is better. But in the tourist industry that expansive model has drawbacks, as witnessed in Barcelona. Residents there contend cost of housing and living expenses are driving local residents out of the city, not to mention other concerns about quality of life. We see some of these impacts affecting the plateau, with housing costs off the charts to where any plan to provide workforce housing is becoming very problematic. Traffic too is increasing.

I see limitations on infrastructure capacity to handle more and more tourists and, to some degree, more permanent residents. Being surrounded by the national forest attracts visitors wanting to view nature and hike, but it also limits land available for expansion.

I attended a transportation planning meeting this past week with regional, county, and NCDOT officials. The group prioritized road and transportation needs in Macon County. While the bridge at Middle Creek on NC 106 is about to be replaced, and the C. Tom Bryson bridge on US 64 will eventually be replaced, there are no plans for road widening or new roads on the plateau for the foreseeable future. In fact, roads like the Gorge Road cannot be widened. One DOT engineer told me that the peak-period traffic load is so heavy on US 64 between Highlands and Cashiers that it rivals any tourist corridor in WNC. The environmental impact of widening that road would be shocking and, in the engineer's estimation, would probably cost three-quarters of a billion dollars. Several years ago, NC 106 was slated for improvement, but public resistance canceled the project, which would have begun around 2030. There are no plans to revisit that project in the near term. At Cashiers, there are already two-mile back-ups at the crossroads at peak tourist periods. Any plan to address this problem is several years away at best.

Also, those traffic backups are now beginning to appear in Highlands. As the editorial noted, downtown sidewalks are very narrow, and parking has its limitations. On peak weekends, the downtown may already be a full capacity.

With growing issues related to climate conditions, Highlands can not hold onto the notion that we have unlimited water supplies. We are dependent on groundwater from continuous rain. Last summer, we faced a major drought that pressured our municipal water plant. This summer, we have also had drought conditions. Since Cashiers is unincorporated, its water situation and utility

systems are even more challenging for unlimited growth, more development, and tourism.

Some may say the mayor and town board should solve all these issues. My response is we are not the sole players in this development drama. Some variables are probably beyond our control. Save the water guns for your children and grandchildren.