

April 2, 2014

Sallie and I have been on the road this Easter week, traveling and visiting our children who work in Washington, DC. As I have said before, when we visit other communities, I frequently compare them to Highlands. Sometimes, I get insights into how the town can do things differently and better. Sometimes what I observe in our travels confirms that what our town does and how it operates is very good, just as it is.

Our children work in Washington but live in the Shenandoah Valley, some 70 miles from Washington. As a result of isolation brought on by COVID-19, and the resulting shift to remote working, their jobs allowed them to do a lot of remote work, so they purchased a house for a much lower price than paying rent in DC. The Shenandoah region is still a beautiful, bucolic land primarily of farms with rolling pastures and hardwood forests. We think we have historical sites in Highlands, but everywhere one goes in the Shenandoah region is really historic. If a building or village in the Shenandoah was built in the 1800's, it is considered to be rather new.

Now, our children illustrate the problem that longtime residents in the Shenandoah Valley face: a growing influx of Washington Beltway folks. Western Carolina has been confronted with similar pressures since COVID-19, with a surge in people from places like Florida seeking high ground and cool temperatures. Climate and technological innovation are drivers of dynamic migration patterns in many areas of the country, like Western Carolina and Colorado. The ironic state to me is Florida. People continue to move there while there is an exodus of Floridians escaping sweltering temperatures, hurricanes, unsustainable insurance rates, bugs, pythons, and rising water levels.

In some counties in the Shenandoah area, there has been intense growth, while in other counties, development has been very limited. A number of counties have retained their beautiful farmland and agricultural economy to some extent. The difference in the growth seems to be county zoning regulations. Some counties have strict zoning and historic preservation regulations, like the one where our kids live, while others do not.

Here lies the conflict: the need to preserve land and nature and also provide spaces for people to live and have their basic needs met. This conflict is the great issue of the day everywhere. I don't have the answer for the Shenandoah or for

Western Carolina, but I do know towns and counties in both regionals will face this growing pressure.

I do have a concern for our Western Carolina region. A number of our counties and unincorporated communities have no zoning. Macon County is a prime example. It seems to me that zoning should be a basic steppingstone in addressing the pressures of growing demand and development. I know that some may see zoning as a terrible curse while others see it as a blessing. But with no zoning regulations in place, we see a "Wild West" scenario on the horizon.

Do we manage growth or not? In Highlands, we have had zoning since the 1970s. Zoning has served as a tool to help the town manage development. The big question is how counties and unincorporated communities with no zoning will fare as development pressures persist.