

Subject STR
June 2, 2022

I support the difficult decision that the Highlands Board of Commissioners made by a vote of four of the town commissioners to limit the spread of short-term rentals(STR). That vote impacted the future use of their homes and families, as well as my own. Since I have never done a short-term rental of our home - located in R2, our children, who may one day inherit the house, will not be eligible for STR use. My children will have options concerning our home. They can sell the house, rent it long term or as a vacation rental for over 30 days. In addition, the new ordinance permits home-stays in all residential zones. A home-stay occurs when a resident remains in the home while renting a portion of their home such as a bedroom or two for short period of time, i.e. a weekend or a week. Also, either one of my children can decide to move to Highlands and live in the home like so many families have done before.

After the decision of the Highlands Board of Commissioners, I also read the letters to the editor and full-page ads in the newspapers concerning short term rentals. I was struck by the all-or-nothing position presented. The purported STR economic impact study painted the picture that Highlands would be thrown into an economic disaster with the elimination of STRs. The reality is that the board did not eliminate STRs, but only curtailed their spread into R1 and R2 neighborhoods. In fact, those people already doing STRs in these zones are grandfathered in and can continue STR operations at their current levels. STRs are permitted in all business zones, so I am puzzled that this dire economic projection was once again disseminated. I will also add that the town of Highlands has maintained a strong economic position for decades, long before the recent STR trend swept the nation. The emergence of short-term rentals in recent years has not "laid the golden egg" for Highlands as I have been repeatedly told. We have had a vibrant, and sustained economy for decades, not just in the last three or so years because of short term rentals.

There might be some folks not happy with the prohibition on further STRs in the residential zones because they had plans of purchasing multiple homes for the sole purpose of operating them as short-term rentals. Members of the Board and many town residents found this spread of STRs throughout residential zones to be a major problem for the future quality of life in Highlands. I, too, was concerned that the STR trend would transform Highlands into an overwhelmingly transient community. By amending the ordinances to regulate and limit the proliferation of STRs, the board took a stand for the future of Highlands.

The letter to the editor and ads indicated that the board had taken several illegal steps by amending the current zoning ordinances. The truth is that those decisions were made after careful consultation and advice from legal experts in the field of North Carolina zoning law. Elected municipal officials in North Carolina have the authority to regulate and restrict what is permitted in established zoning districts. If the courts, or the legislature, overrule or preempt that long established municipal authority, the future of Highlands as we have come to know it might be in jeopardy. Instead of saving Highlands, it might just be lost.

Pat Taylor