

Subject: Southwest Regional Planning Organization Report  
October 1, 2023

I was at a Southwest Regional Planning Organization meeting last week, where elected officials from towns and counties met to address regional concerns. It was a celebration of sorts in that the state budget had just been approved. Our legislators, Representative Karl Gillespie and Senator Kevin Corbin, have obtained a lot of support for the counties and towns of Western Carolina. The items in the budget that our legislators secured were much needed and essential for this area. Those funds will directly impact the citizens and the quality of life in WNC.

At the meeting, Tommy Long, a commissioner from Haywood County and a director of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, gave a sobering report of major challenges facing this mountain region. For that matter, his assessments apply not only to local governments but to the state and nation as a whole.

His remarks centered around several critical priorities: of course, economic development, but also education, aging populations, health and medical care, and national defense. He ended his remark with national defense because failure to address those other issues does have implications for the national welfare, security, and defense.

Everyone at the meeting was celebrating the funds in the new North Carolina budget that will impact the region. Leaders are so grateful to Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie for their work in making sure we all got a fair share. That is not an easy feat when the population numbers do not favor Western Carolina, at least not yet.

Commissioner Long and others at the meeting stressed that North Carolina is the ninth most populous state and soon to be number eight. A whole lot of North Carolina's new residents will be located in Western Carolina. We have challenges in meeting these impending demographic shifts.

Commissioner Long had a distinguished career as an electrical engineer at the now-closed paper mill in Canton. With his skill and training, moving to another position will be possible. But he, along with Mayor Smathers of Canton, continues to work to help those skilled and trained workers retrain for new careers.

Tommy stressed that all elected officials need to make education for our young people and career workers a number one priority. Yes, education is an expensive proposition, but we can't afford to neglect this important aspect of a functional, dynamic, and civilized society.

He, along with staff for the Southwestern Commission, reminded the group that we have a growing population of senior citizens. Many of our new residents will be retirees requiring healthcare and related services. The commissioner also stressed we need programs promoting healthy lifestyles, mental health resources, and programs to break the vicious cycle of alcohol and drug addiction.

Commissioner Long stressed these challenges translate into national security and defense issues. He reminded us that veterans compose 6% of the population but 20% of the national suicide rate. We can't let that stand. He also pointed out that recruiting quotas for the military are continuing to fall about 15 to 20% short each year; about 25% of the prospective recruits

can't pass the basic literacy and math proficiency tests, i.e., they are poorly educated. Another 25% cannot pass the physical screening tests due to obesity and poor health. These problems stress our social services, schools, and certainly our health and medical systems. Furthermore, it boils down to lifestyle problems that are exacerbated by addiction issues. The basic solutions begin with a comprehensive education in our homes, towns, and counties.

While we were all upbeat about the future at the meeting, Commissioner Long reminded us there is much more work to be done.