

June 15
Town Meeting

My heart almost stopped when Josh Ward told me that the public hearing concerning STR amendments had not been properly advertised as a legal notice in the Highlander. That oversight invalidated the subsequent actions of the Town Board in amending the UDO ordinances related to STRs; therefore, the process will have to be done all over again. While I view the failure to advertise as a technical problem, the town, of course, has to follow all NC Statutes in amending zoning ordinances.

NC Statute 1-597 governing legal notices states that any legal notice has to be advertised in a subscription circulation newspaper within the local area. The only newspaper that meets that requirement is the Highlander Newspaper.

Proper notice for publishing the advertisement was sent to the Highlander, but the legal notice was not published. Our staff did not follow up after sending the request to confirm the notice was going to be published. It was a miscommunication between the newspaper and the town.

What is frustrating was that it was a technical error. No one was attempting to conceal the hearing, and the date and time of the hearing had been posted on the town website. The Sunshine list of well over 100 people was sent and they were notified. All the local newspapers had written stories about the hearing, and in this column I had written about the hearing and outlined the protocols for conducting the hearing. I also talked about the hearing on the Ask the Mayor radio show. I posted the hearing protocols on the personal website, Askmayorpat.com, which reaches 670 email recipients each week. So, I was frustrated when I learned about the legal notice not being posted. I suspect that this oversight did not prevent hardly anyone from not knowing about the hearing.

For what it is worth, I believe NC Statute 1-597, Regulations for Newspaper Publications of Legal Notices, Advertisements, etc. is outdated and needs amending. While the legal notice in a subscription newspaper could be retained, there are alternative options. Why not allow municipalities and counties other ways to inform the public? I don't want to offend my journalists friends, but subscription newspapers are just one way the public accesses information. Many people use the internet, for instance town websites, to obtain information. Online newspapers and free, local newspapers routinely post information of a legal, governmental nature on their websites. Like Highlands, many municipalities maintain list serves where anyone can subscribe. I'm just a little small-town mayor, but I will ask our legislative representatives to look into changes to NC 1-597. It is the age of the internet and social media, not decades ago when that statute was first written for print media.

Thursday is the Highlands Town Board of Commissioners meeting at the Highlands Community Center at 7 pm. First on the agenda will be a public hearing for the 2022/23

town budget. After the hearing there is a full agenda, including the presentation of a completed draft of the Highlands Comprehensive Community Plan. See everyone Thursday.