

Subject: Town Retreat

As a university professor and administrator, I've been on a number of "working" retreats. It usually meant checking into a very nice resort followed by an afternoon cocktail party with colleagues, aka rivals. After cocktails, we would have a kickoff rubber chicken and green pea banquet. A keynote expert speaker would always remind us in some way to work smarter, not harder. The next morning, we would have breakout sessions where reams of flip chart paper would be generated. After lunch, everyone would hit the golf course, trails, or pool, endeavoring to again reconnect and understand their crazy colleagues. In the evening, after another "scrumptious" dinner, and then our leader would make a speech that would be a valiant, albeit long, effort to bring meaning to all those flip chart notes and set the vision for the new academic year. Oh, how I miss the intellectually exhilarating retreats.

So, I've always thought the Highlands Town Retreat is a misnomer; we don't retreat anywhere. And the board and staff only get drinks with one free lunch. This year, the choices are tea, cokes, water, and pizza or sandwiches. Our retreat enclave will be the Highlands Recreation Center. It begins at 9 am, Thursday, March 7, and ends by around 4 pm. It's not really a retreat but rather an all-day budget workshop. Let me highlight some things to be reviewed.

In the morning, the board and staff will hear a report from the consultant who has completed a comprehensive study of our electric grid. He will tell us we need to upgrade the grid to the tune of about 4 million dollars. Since the pandemic, there has been a big increase in electricity demand—more and more people are staying longer in Highlands. We must address this demand increase with a grid upgrade or eventually face California-style blackouts. The good news is that we can make these upgrades using electric fund reserves, thereby avoiding an electric rate increase.

We will also hear a report concerning replacing our pre-clarifier tank and adding a filter train at the water plant. Last year, Highlands received 5 million dollars for upgrading the water plant, but these upgrades will cost even more. Our auditors and the NC Local Government Commission will expect the town to raise water and sewer rates to cover these increases. These improvements are essential to future water and sewer operations.

After lunch there will be a report by the architectural firm that did a conditions study of the Highlands Playhouse buildings. The study covers all components of the building. Estimated costs to bring the facility up to current codes will be included.

Normally, final action on any issue is not taken at the retreat, but this year, there will be a few budget amendments requested. The big one will be the contract for rebuilding and stabilizing part of Little Bear Pen Road. I predict the board will get a case of sticker shock when they hear the budget amendment, but that repair cannot be delayed. We will have to use reserve funds to get the contractor on-site without delay.

The public is invited to attend any part or all of the retreat.