

The Highlands Plateau is hot. No, not summer hot, we are still cool, but Highlands is as hot as a desirable place to live with incredible beauty coupled with a strong community and civic life.

Everywhere on the plateau, construction is underway. With that rush to build comes challenges. In the town, and in some respects in the county, there are ordinances in place to ensure responsible building practices and environmental protocols to protect the watershed.

Within the county and town, a major building project can not be done without the required permitting. For instance, a new deck for a house needs to be permitted and inspected so it is structurally sound for those special parties with the deck holding a full load of folks. There have been several deck collapses throughout the country in recent years, some of which could have been prevented.

In the downtown B1 zone, there are extensive construction requirements, especially concerning fire code ordinances. The concept behind these strict fire codes in B1 is to protect all the businesses that are connected to one another. In short, code requirements are for the greater public good.

Erosion control ordinances, such as requiring silt fencing when land disturbance occurs, are not only to protect the public watershed, but also to protect the property of other owners. The issue of runoff and water flow control is particularly challenging in this area of steep terrain and extremely high rainfall.

The town strives to enforce both building code requirements and erosion control. Before building a structure, a town permit is required. It can be obtained at the town hall. That permit is the first step in getting a county construction permit. That permit is obtained at the county government complex at 1834 Lakeside Drive, Franklin. The same permitting process applies to landscape projects where significant areas of land are disturbed or removed.

This past year, the town has hired a code enforcement officer who patrols the town to make sure proper permits are in place. If he sees a construction site where earth is being moved or a structure is being built, he will verify if the proper permits are in place. If not, a stop work order is issued until permits are acquired. A yellow building permit poster is supposed to be displayed in clear view at any construction site. If it is not displayed, residents can report a possible noncompliance, and our enforcement officer will investigate.

In recent weeks, concerns have surfaced about construction sites that are not in compliance with erosion control requirements. Specifically, complaints were made concerning home construction sites in the River Walk Subdivision. Our enforcement personnel inspected the sites and determined that the silt fencing

met town and state ordinance requirements. Some questioned that determination and filed a complain with the state. Their concern was apparently that siltation was or would flow into Mirror Lake. At the time of this writing the state has not responded.

There have been recent violations of the silt fence requirements that impact the Cullasaja River, but not at River Walk. Those violations occurred outside the town limits. Nevertheless, our enforcement officer did report the violations to Macon County, which has jurisdiction over the area where the violations occurred.

There have been other violations throughout the plateau area. When a town official observes such situations, the county is notified. Since the town rescinded ETJ authority over a decade ago, we do not have jurisdictional authority over these violations that are just outside the town limits. Now, some might think the mayor should take the lead and get ETJ reinstated. Sorry, but that boat sailed away a while back. Some experts predict that the state legislature is about to nix all ETJs throughout the state. They are certainly in no mood to allow more ETJ zones now.

My real concern is that a few new residents, investors in the community, are building huge houses and complexes with little mindfulness or regard for the sensitive environment of the Highlands Plateau. I know I sound like a stuck record, but too often people buy large tracts of land only to decimate the forest and landscape to create a spectacular view for a huge house. I was made aware of such a situation only last week with a piece of high mountain property just outside of town.

What can be done? Maybe it is time for a major educational initiative among stakeholders like the town, county, and non-profits such as the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust and the Highlands Biological Foundation. My position is that while we all own property here in this wonderful mountain paradise, we do not own nature. We are mere stewards of the land. Our actions toward the land, the vegetation, the water, and the animals have a lasting impact. Mindful decisions should be our goal.