Well, we finally did it, that is, the town and chamber have come to an agreement about the lease of the chamber building owned by the town. This back-and-forth issue had gone on for more than a year.

I am glad both sides have come to an agreement and can now move forward. I appreciate what the Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Visit Highlands do for the town in promoting tourism. I hope a constructive relationship with the town and county will continue. I believe two specific things can be done in the near future to enhance the relationship: Updating the Legislation used by the Chamber of Commerce and providing a financial disclosure,

First, the controversy over the chamber building lease began when members of the town board asked for Tax-Deferred Annuity (TDA) funds to be used to clean public bathrooms on Main Street at Town Square. The costto clean and maintain these bathrooms seemed appropriate as they are almost exclusively used by our tourists and visitors. Some on the town board believed this request for TDA funds to be used instead of town taxpayer funds was reasonable.

Chamber staff and the county attorney stated that cleaning bathrooms was not a permitted expense under the TDA legislation that the county is under. Under this 1986 TDA statute, funds could only be used to promote tourism. The sticking point is defining what ‘promoting tourism’ includes.

I have read the 1986 TDA enabling legislation for Macon County. That almost 40-year-old statute is vague about what can and cannot be funded with TDA tax dollars. The legislation that the county operates under was passed by the NC legislature as a local bill on July 16, 1986.

I think the issue of whether TDA funds can be used to clean tourist bathroom facilities illustrates how obsolete this legislation is. Put another way, Macon County and Highlands have outgrown this 40-year-old statue. It is time to work with our legislative delegation to upgrade to a more flexible and dynamic model for managing TDA funds in Macon County.

In fact, the North Carolina Legislature came to the same conclusion 28 years agoin 1997 and passed a reform TDA legislation, G.S. 153A-155 and G.S. 160A-215. Macon County never requested to be put under this updated legislation and continued to operate under the initial very limited guidance. According to the counties and municipalities follow the 1997 guidelines where tourist-related expenses are permitted. The 1986 Senate Bill 948 that enables Macon County to collect occupancy tax states, "Revenue in this Fund may be used only to promote travel and tourism in the county." Going to the 1997 legislation or modifying the 1986 legislation to include “Tourist Related Expenditures,” the county and the Highlands TDA would have more latitude to spend occupancy tax money where paying to maintain bathrooms used almost solely by visiting tourists would be no issue or obstacle.

Second, another improvement that would strengthen public confidence in how occupancy tax is spent in the Highlands would be to have a full and specific disclosure of how these taxes are used and spent. This process would clearly define the relationship between the Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Highlands. Over the past several years, the Highlands TDA and chamber have received well over a million dollars yearly in occupancy tax collections. Many residents want a clear picture of how these tax dollars are spent. I and sure an annual public financial statement will go a long way in enhancing public trust in the process.