

At the Highlands Town Board meeting last Thursday, a concern was raised that some folks felt they had not been informed about the recent changes to employee parking in the business area. The board voted to implement these changes at the June meeting, following reviews of the proposed changes at several earlier meetings.

I probably came across as being defensive when I stated that this had not been a sudden decision and that nothing had been hidden from the public in the process. Throughout the many years I've served as mayor, the board and I've worked to maintain the highest level of transparency possible.

Several meetings ago, Commissioner Patterson brought up her concern that adjustments were needed in the employee parking zones. The board engaged in a discussion of the matter. At the following board meeting, the employee parking issue was again on the agenda. After further discussion, the board members agreed that the issue was complicated. They sent it to the Highlands Planning Board for their study and recommendations. In their public meeting, the planning board reviewed the employee parking issues and sent recommendations to the town board.

At the June meeting, the town made a few minor adjustments but voted to accept and approve the planning board's recommendations. During this lengthy review period, no one voiced any concerns about the proposed changes at the public comment periods. The town had announced this entire process on several occasions, and the news media covered the issue at every meeting.

I suppose my point is that the communication we all want from local government and the community has to be a two-way street. I humbly suggest that for those wanting to be informed, there are several key options.

First, our local weekly newspapers do an excellent job of covering all items in town government meetings. I suggest that people read the papers to stay informed about their local government. Additionally, the town maintains a sunshine list, where all agendas, reports, presentations, and proposals are shared with everyone on the list. Anyone can call the town hall and request to be placed on the sunshine list. Third, we have a town website where that same information is posted. We are now improving and updating the website. Through that website, citizens can also access all town board meetings. And just recently, the town developed the Town of Highlands App. It is free on any site where apps are obtained. The app sends our current announcements and a schedule of town meetings and events, and much more.

And if that were not enough, I write this column every week for the newspapers, do a weekly radio show on WHLC, and hold a community coffee each month during the season. I also post information on my website, AskMayorPat.com.

Many, many residents access all these sources. Nevertheless, I encourage everyone to learn what is going on and express their views to the town commissioners. They are willing and ready to listen, as am I. Additionally, everyone is invited to speak and make a statement on any town issue during the public comment period at each monthly town board meeting.

Some may say that maybe you're just blowing smoke; the board does what it wants to do. Not so! Let me give you a recent example. The board was about to change one side of 4<sup>th</sup> Street from diagonal parking to parallel parking to improve safety on the hill past Main Street. Merchants where the parking change would be made attended a board meeting and expressed their concern that their businesses would be harmed. They suggested simply moving the center line to provide more space on that side of the street, thereby improving safety. The board listened, and now that is the plan we have with NCDOT.

Let me review the available communication options: weekly newspapers, the Sunshine List, the town website, The Highlands Town App, the Mayor's weekly broadcast on WHLC, the Mayor's monthly Community coffee event, attendance at the Town Board Meetings, and Ask.MayorPat.com, which currently features 192 information videos and over 200 information letters (eBlasts).

Effective communication requires a back-and-forth exchange of ideas and information. Let us discuss the issues together, especially before the town board takes a final vote.