The impending budget, Mirror Lake dredging, storm recovery, code enforcement, the STR bill, state pressures on municipal zoning, and the start of town construction projects are all issues facing Highlands.  When I look back to when I first became mayor almost 12 years ago, the operation of the town these days is much more challenging.  On the other hand, the same can be said for almost all North Carolina municipalities.

Looking back there are some ironic moments about the past positions that I have taken.  For instance, as homeowner insurance rates began to significantly increase throughout the state due to devastating hurricanes hitting the coast like Matthew and Fred, I asked why folks in Western Carolina should be expected to shoulder increased rates.  My rationale was that we never have a hurricane hit WNC with the destructive power as those on the coast.  Well, Helene proved me wrong.  Our town has been fortunate in that we have recovered from Helene and are fully open for business as spring approaches.

The town is making progress in dredging Mirror Lake. Some may ask why it is taking so long and why the upfront engineering fees are so high. My response is that the town, or any other entity, must do this preliminary work before disturbing any US waterway like Mirror Lake. Months of study and planning lie ahead before phase 2 dredging gets underway.

Some may think the town is too intrusive on code enforcement, and others think we are too lax. My response is that we have zoning and development ordinances that we strive to enforce consistently and without bias. These ordinances have contributed to making Highlands a special place to live and visit. The town board and staff are committed to continuously reviewing the ordinances to determine where any needed revisions and improvements can be made.

By now, most of us are aware of several pending state bills that could potentially impact zoning throughout the state.  In particular, our staff is tracking SB 291, which would provide comprehensive regulation of STRs throughout the state.  If passed in its present form, Highlands’  September 24, 2022, STR ordinance that grandfathered STRs operating prior to the ordinance passage would be invalidated and superseded.  Put another way, any home residence in Highlands could be operated as an STR.  We will have to wait for the sovereign state of North Carolina to make a decision one way or the other.  A vote to enact SB 291 would settle the issue by the state.  A failed vote would be a de facto statement that the legislature defers to municipalities in regulating STRs.  A showdown is pending.

Two construction projects are about to get underway.  One is the Dog Mountain water project that we have been working with the state bureaucracy to get underway for three years now.  We had hoped to get the go-ahead this past winter so most of the disruptive construction would have been done before seasonal residents returned to town.  Unfortunately, the construction will now begin sometime around the summer months.  We also signed a contract to run the new transmission lines for a third electric circuit.  That line will be installed running down US 64 in the north of town.  The good news is that this project should get away in the next few weeks and be completed by early summer at the latest.

Finally, let me make a major disclaimer.  I communicate information based on the best information available at this time.  Many times, unforeseen circumstances occur that generate a delay or change in plans.  That phenomenon sometimes frustrates me to no end, but it is always a looming factor.

I will continue to try to keep everyone updated as best I can.