Subject; parking in Highlands

July 12, 2023

It is the time of the year when I again get this question. Mayor, what are you going to do about the town providing more parking?

My response is always that Highlands has more parking places in the downtown area than almost any town of comparable size in Western Carolina.  Heck, we have more parking than a number of towns with much larger populations.

I am constantly urged to lead the way in building a parking garage and pay for it by charging a fee.  My response is that we would have to meter the entire town. No one would use the garage if parking were free on Main Street.  I cite Blowing Rock, which spent about 2 million dollars for a 65-space parking garage way off their Main Street. It has been underused.

So, to build a parking garage of any size in Highlands would first require identifying a site close to the downtown.  Second, how big would the garage be, 200 spaces, 500 spaces? Then there would be the cost of building the garage and operating it. Who would finance the five or 10-million-dollar project? The Asheville Airport built a 1000-car facility for just under 20 million. We could anticipate any parking garage costing millions of dollars.

The Highlands Comprehensive Plan does present possible parking platforms in spaces around the business district. This type of parking is certainly an option in the future, but such a system would not increase parking to a high level as some folks would want.

The fundamental question that the town will have to address in the coming years is how big should the business area be and at what capacity level is sustainable.  I submit that we are close to being maxed out in how many people we can accommodate at a given period in the downtown area.

Not only do we face parking and trash issues, but also concerns about traffic management. Cashiers already has a critical traffic issue at the crossroads where on holidays and even at different times during a regular day, traffic is backed up for long distances at all entry points.

We are seeing similar patterns emerge in Highlands.  The question is whether we can manage higher and higher traffic loads in Highlands.  Yes, we may be able to improve some aspects of traffic flow, but increasing capacity will have its limitations.

I don’t see much that can be done to increase traffic capacity on US 64 from Cashiers to Highlands short of blasting parts for the mountains way like was done near Lake Toxaway a few years ago.  The Gorge Road cannot be improved to any significant level to increase capacity. The US Forest Service even now restricts NCDOT from trimming back trees on the road because of bat habitats, so widening the road is off the table.  NC 106 has similar restrictions, and current improvement plans are scheduled for around 2035 or even 2040.

The town could ask NCDOT to revive a 1990s plan to build a bypass from US 64 near the new fire department that would come out on 64 near the recreation department.  I, for one, and many of my fellow citizens would definitely oppose such a plan, a notion that has been done to address downtown traffic in so many other towns.

With new economic growth comes many additional challenges. In the coming months and years, our community will have to grapple with these pressing issues.   Do we save Highlands as a small village community, or do we transform it into a mini-Atlanta of the mountains? At the risk of being accused of having tunnel vision, I fall on the village side.

**MAYOR PAT**