**BEHIND CLOSED DOORS**

10-25-19

We have an important election coming up on Nov. 5 and I would like to share my thoughts with you on the district 4 race between Ronnie Duffey and Dennis Witt. I have served with both of these gentlemen on Halifax Town council and I've known Dennis since he first came to Halifax County 22 years ago. Dennis is a personal friend and I have admired his administrative abilities over the years. Of course, we don't agree on everything, but heck, neither do I and the beautiful lady I've been married to for the past 62 years. I do, however, have real concerns about Dennis' management style and the way he governs us behind closed doors. On some occasions, I have been appalled at the lack of respect he has shown for the good people who put him in office to represent them openly and fairly. That simply has not happened: Too often communication has been nonexistent and it's been Dennis' way or the highway. That's not the way it's supposed to work. We live in a democracy, not a dictatorship and the good people of Halifax County deserve better.

General accusations are onerous so allow me to cite a few specific examples. Please bear in mind that neither Dennis nor any BOS member is an engineer, architect or construction supervisor. I'll begin with the Courthouse which is arguably the most mismanaged construction project in the history of Halifax County and much of that blame can be laid squarely at the feet of Mr. Witt. The Town of Halifax made many, many requests to meet with Mr. Witt about the courthouse as is mandated by state guidelines and each time we were rebuffed. Oh, the architects did show up one day with completed drawings but it was too late then to make necessary changes. Since then, structural issues with the old buildings have mandated a complete redesign and again we were left out in the cold. What we're ending up with is a series of high-rise structures that dwarf the historic courthouse and everything is jammed into a postage-stamp size lot with no parking. The cost has skyrocketed from $14 million to over $30 million and we're not through yet. Many excuses have been put forward for this fiasco ranging from a court gag order to a completion timetable, none of which exists. All of that could have been prevented by those mandated preliminary meetings.

We had many other options: One being to renovate the old courthouse and move the other two courts to next-door vacant lots or Bethune or the Farmers Market or even the Burlington mills site. All had certain advantages and money could have been saved. We'll never know. We are now blessed with a new County administrator, Scott Simpson who is an engineer and while Scott will be a big help to us in the future, he didn't arrive in time to assist with the courthouse design.

Another case in point: Please take a look at the new courthouse wall that's now going up; it is a full cantilevered, steel reinforced retaining wall tied to a monstrous footing and probably cost a fortune. It will hold up a Sherman tank. Why? All it needs to do is hold back 3' or 4' of dirt and that could be done with hand laid decorative block like the war memorial right next door or an 8" curbing with imaginative landscaping. Either would be more appealing and cost effective. Who's looking out for the taxpayers? Where's the accountability? I offered my professional services, free of charge 2 years ago and never got a reply.

Halifax is the second love of my life, both Town and County, and I have devoted my entire adult life of 60+ years to the betterment of this special place and these special people. I don't have to tell you that we're hurting and now more than ever. All the numbers are down, our kids are leaving for greener pastures, unemployment is up, jobs are down, schools are bad and we need help. We need new and younger leadership with fresh ideas.

The IDA has been another expensive embarrassment under Dennis' watch. Remember several years ago when our IDA director convinced the BOS to invest a couple of million dollars in renovating the old Daystrom building for a surefire tenant ready to move in. Well, we built it but they did not come, because, I hear, our former director and staff didn't like the prospect's business plan. That company recently moved into a new building in Charlotte Co. and we the taxpayers of Halifax County are left holding the bag. We get nothing but silence from the IDA and Mr. Witt. Where is the accountability? After 4 years of producing nothing our former IDA director walked away, sayonara! I served on the IDA for 16 yrs. so I know a thing or two. And it's not the board, they're basically a group of willing volunteers who must rely on staff for info. It's the hired staff and the many interconnected tentacles therein. We now have a new IDA director and he really has his work cut out for him. I wish him well.

Long ago, there was little love lost between the towns and the county. In fact, sometimes there were open hostilities. All of that changed with boundary adjustment in the 90's under the affable leadership of chairman Joe Satterfield. I recall one contentious meeting when our mayor walked out in a huff over some triviality and that could have killed the whole thing--but Joe brought us back together and the rest is history. Afterwards, Mr. Satterfield set up joint quarterly meetings with the towns and life was good. Today we're lucky to meet once a year and only then to sign some official business. Hey, Joe where are you when we need you, Buddy? Times, they have changed and not for the better.

So, there you have it in a nutshell. For the past 4 years we have lost jobs and population and there's little on the horizon to turn this ship around. With all due respect for Dennis, I think we need to go in a new direction. We need open, accountable government with new and fresh ideas and for those reasons I am voting for Ronnie Duffey. Ronnie is a local boy, born and raised right here in Halifax County. He's a school teacher and a successful small business entrepreneur. Ronnie is an approachable guy who will listen to us. He will represent ALL the people, not a select few and we can trust him to never operate behind closed doors. I have every confidence that Ronnie Duffey will represent us well.

I am also proud to endorse Jay Camp for the school board. I can't think of anyone much more qualified than Jay and I'm sure he too, will represent us well.

Sincerely, Jack Dunavant