

Intimidated?

-Chris Smithson, Southern Pines native, resident, and Councilmember

I was recently speaking with a resident who is a relative newcomer to the area and for whom I have a great deal of respect. They told me that some in the community felt intimidated when it came to speaking up about certain town matters. I asked them to elaborate further so I could understand better. In this case, they said people were reluctant to speak up about certain things because, for example, there are not a huge number of employers in this area offering a full spectrum of positions and that speaking up could limit one's job prospects. They further went on to say that some feel "the Chamber (Moore County Chamber of Commerce) runs the town anyway."

I'll address the Chamber issue first. As a Councilmember for three years, I can say I have never felt any undue pressure coming from the Chamber on any issue. Perhaps this is because the Chamber's official position is often similar to that of the Town's. While the Chamber is the business booster group for the county, they also have in their directives the maintenance of the special quality of life in the area. Possibly unlike many other chambers of commerce, the Moore County Chamber has chosen to restrain itself by not necessarily being for ALL business growth or for business growth at any cost. That said, there are some individual business boosters in the area who are quite vocal and differ from the Chamber's position. They have the right to speak up just like any other resident, but they're not usually speaking for the group. I do take what the Chamber has to say seriously, but if I feel the Chamber's position is different from what is best for Southern Pines, I wouldn't hesitate for a second to make the decision which I believe to be in the town's best interest, not the Chamber's.

I guess the intimidation issue shouldn't be too surprising. Last year during the car dealership unpleasantness, there were some people who felt differently than the vocal and large opposition group. Though I encouraged them to speak up and participate in the debate, at least some of them felt intimidated by the opposition. Land use can sometimes be an emotional issue, so I guess I can understand why some would choose not to speak up especially when some opponents to the project made tearful appeals during public hearings.

As it applies to employment issues, I have to admit I never looked at it that way. Perhaps that's partly because we have no shortage of retirees around here who are beholden to no one who readily and frequently speak their minds. I do understand some of the employment situation though. My wife and I felt that in order for us to be able to move back to Southern Pines, at least one of needed to be self-employed as the employers with positions matching our professional work experience were limited. For a couple of years I kicked around a few different business ideas to start up here. Fortunately, and unexpectedly, I was able to enter the family business, even though it meant a nice pay cut. Living in Southern Pines is certainly worth it though.

The intimidation/anonymity issue, especially as it relates to employment and other related factors is a bit tricky. I already have quite a few people who speak with me on many town related issues. Some ask me not to quote them or pass along to others what they have said. That's fine with me and I honor their requests. I also get personal e-mails from some although there is some question as to whether or not they are public records. Certainly, anything sent through town offices or servers might be public documents, but the law is a bit fuzzy on personal accounts. Regardless, someone would need a court order to get my personal e-mail, so it's not like someone wouldn't have to go through some trouble to find out a resident's opinion. We should also remember that one shouldn't post or send anything on the internet without the realization there's a chance it could be read by everyone at some point.

In my position as Councilmember in Southern Pines, I am here to listen to everyone. Many citizens communicate with me on town matters. Hopefully everyone should feel comfortable coming to me with any questions or concerns. I have yet to bite anyone. If asked, I keep things as confidential as I legally can. One should remember, however, that public information and debate are important components of our government and I will encourage everyone to speak up too. Public hearings and public comment sessions are fine for getting what you have to say recorded in official minutes, and letters to the editor are great for getting your words in print, but they are not necessarily the best forums for interactive discussions. If you have any questions or concerns over town matters, please stop me in the street, call, or e-mail me.

Chris