

“A guiding principle informs an open discussion, which can lead to the determination of a policy that can result in the writing of an ordinance or a law”.



I said that last night, to my wife, as I was trying to explain what I felt this column's focus needed to be at this time and in this place.

The Christmas spirit has not left me and my optimism for the New Year, while still in one piece, has been sorely tested by the article in the December 31 *Gazette* headlined “County Council members reflect on freshman year”. Yup, I think I heard the gasps of disbelief and sighs of disappointment coming from many of you too. Somehow, I would have hoped that our elected representatives would have had something more substantive to say after one year than: “I get lessons in humility every day”; or “...thought we could stop or slow down some of the growth and annexation process, but we really couldn't do any of that...” or, “the most exciting thing was getting on the Enterprise, you know, the aircraft carrier... that's something I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't been elected to the County Council”.

I suspect I speak for a lot of us when I say: We didn't elect you to learn humility. We elected you because you came up our stairs, knocked on our doors and promised strong, new leadership. We did not elect you so that you could conclude that nothing could be done about growth and annexation. We elected you because you promised “smart growth”. We didn't elect you just so you could enjoy the perks of office. We know they're nice and we know your pay stinks, but you wanted the job.

We elected you to represent us and it's time that every member of our County Council; every member of our City Council and every one of our State Representatives and State Senators all finally tell us what the heck you all actually mean by “Smart Growth”.

Is it 47 cars waiting at a too-long light in a way-too-short left turn lane from 21 onto 802 at 7:30 in the morning? Is it avoiding the discussion of what constitutes proper impact fees from developers because the developers themselves and real estate agents are against them and warn that higher impact fees are just going to be passed on to purchasers?

Is it creating a comprehensive North County Plan only to have its directions and good intentions weakened because of how easy it seems to be to ignore the county's recommended density and setback rules by doing an end-around with an all-too-willing municipality or three to annex the area in question and give you what you want, instead of, maybe, what all of us might consider we actually need?

Is it a new Wal-Mart beside the airport on Lady's Island when there's already one in Beaufort and two more in Hilton Head? Is allowing yet another place for our young people to be relegated to minimum wage jobs “smart growth” or smart economic planning?

This is not about any man or woman's right to sell any land they own to whomever they wish; it is about that fine line that exists between individual liberty and the common good and learning that, sometimes, the answer is not found at either extreme. Occasionally, councils need to caucus, legislators need to legislate and laws need to be changed in order to recognize new and different realities.

What has happened here in the last two years is clearly obvious: Northern Beaufort County has made it onto the radar screens of the real estate departments of the big box stores; the national chains and the fast food companies. It's how they work. They track growth and opportunity and they move in where and when they think their long term economic success has a powerful chance of bearing fruit. When this happens, there is that inevitable cookie-cutter look to everything and the place you live is changed forever.

Seems to me the missing link is that our elected representatives just don't know what we, their electors, want. Maybe that's our fault because we turn out in such low numbers at election time and because we are so consumed with our own challenges and opportunities that we keep ignoring that responsibility in the belief that someone else is taking care of it. But, facts on the ground, along with those statements of the freshmen council members from all over the county, tell us differently. This means we all have a better job to do.

Our elected leaders need to work on that "vision" thing. It does not look like there's very much of it around here yet. They need to lead and to represent us. That is the requirement of their job. It is not to throw their hands up and say "it's too late".

They and we need to know what we want: Is it no growth; some growth; unchecked growth or that elusive "smart growth"? Is it urban density in a rural place because our planners are weak and our developers strong? Is it big box stores and minimum wage paychecks or is it sane economic development that attracts businesses that offer a future that improves life for this region's young people. Do we just do whatever the law allows, or do we, at the same time, also do what's right?

There are lots of questions and probably as many answers, but it has to start somewhere. If this matters to you, please respond to this article. What is your view of "smart growth"? What kind of place do you want our part of the world to be?

Maybe, together, we can help our representatives understand what we want. Maybe that will help them move from the shelter of the slogans of their election campaigns to the challenges of the real world. Maybe they will become a little less humble and a little more effective. And then, they might actually begin to lead.