

Miller: UDO Change Would Kill old WHS Sale

Written by Steve Frank
Friday, 15 February 2013 06:21

The Watauga County Commission chairman has penned a two-page letter to the Boone Town Council and Mayor over the issue of recommendations adopted Tuesday night by the Boone Planning Board from the Affordable Housing Task Force to amend the Unified Development Ordinance. Chairman Nathan Miller did so in his role of representing “One of the largest property owners in the town,” Watauga County. His letter starts out telling the Town that the ordinance change would have the unintended consequence of increasing housing costs. He goes on to say that the change would kill the sale of the old Watauga High site, that harming both the town and county with a loss of tax revenue, not to mention the \$18.9 million sale price. He says the requirements would end student housing development in the town of Boone. His letter concludes with, “the proposed amendment, as currently written, does not accomplish the goal of the town to create affordable housing,” and he asked for the town to take up the matter at their February 21st meeting instead of their Tuesday meeting next week to give commissioners an opportunity to attend the meeting. The letter follows:

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County of Watauga

Administration Building, Suite 205 • 814 West King Street • Boone, North Carolina 28607

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COUNTY ATTORNEY
Stacy C. Eggers, IV

February 12, 2013

The Honorable Loretta Clawson and Members of the Town Council
Town of Boone
567 West King Street
Boone, NC 28607

Dear Mayor Clawson and Members of the Town Council:

As you are aware, on Tuesday, February 11, 2013, the Boone Area Planning Commission voted to approve a recommendation to the Town Council to amend the current Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). The amendment would require new multi-family developments to provide for family oriented design and layout and to encourage a broader range of housing. The County commends the Town on working on the difficult issue of affordable housing; however, the current proposed amendment would not have the desired affect the Town is hoping for.

As one of the largest property owners in the Town, the County requests consideration of the following factors before the adoption of the proposed UDO changes to Section 175.

1. While the intent of the proposed change is to provide for a family oriented design and layout as well as encourage a broader range of housing choices, the proposed change may have the unintentional consequence of increasing housing costs.
BY:
 - a. More expensive to build due to designated larger master suite space, required storage space, increased livability space, building height restrictions, and garages.
 - b. The lower density requirements could cause an increase in sales or rental costs.
2. The Town cannot create a market by regulation, which is essentially what the proposed change is trying to accomplish.
3. The Town has alternatives to the proposed change with the use of the many incentives available to promote affordable housing such as:
 - a. Waiver of Development Review and Meter Installation Fees for Affordable Housing Projects.
 - b. Waiver of Townwide Development Impact Fees for Affordable Housing Units.
 - c. Relaxed Parking Standards for Affordable Housing.
 - d. Utilities Assistance Program for Low-Income Residents.
 - e. Establish an Affordable Housing Fund.These are just a few of the options available to the Town.
4. The specific impact to the County and its citizens based on the proposed change would effectively terminate the current offer on the old high school for \$18,948,000 and limit the potential of future offers.
5. The budgetary impact to the Town and County would be substantial. Without the sale, no property taxes or sales taxes would be recognized and the property would continue to remain vacant with no one receiving any benefits.
6. With the bedroom and bathroom requirements and occupancy limits the proposal will likely have the effect of ending new student housing developments in the Town's jurisdiction. While it is desirable to have a range of multi-family housing options to include market rate and workforce housing, ending student housing developments will not accomplish this goal.
7. Student housing is an essential component of the \$18,948,000 offer and any future offers could be substantially less due to the newly imposed restrictions.
8. The old high school site has been identified as a suitable site for a mixed use development with student housing, commercial and retail spaces.
9. The proposed amendment change would be more acceptable to the County as regards specifically to the old high school site if under subsection (b) the word "building" were changed to "project."

It is the County's belief the proposed amendment, as currently written, does not accomplish the goal of the Town to create affordable housing. This view was echoed by the members of the Planning Commission where they agreed that the proposal needed "tweaks." The Town has the ability to utilize incentives to promote affordable housing. The property owner or builder should not have to shoulder all of the expenses related to providing affordable housing. The County encourages the Town to seek input not only from the Affordable Housing Task Force but the Town's Planning Board and staff, the County's Community Housing Trust, property owners, and builders on suggestions and solutions to the affordable housing issue.

Please listen to those that spoke at the Quarterly Public Hearing, Affordable Housing Task Force members, Planning Commission members, and the general public who all voiced concerns about the current language of the proposed amendment and the need for modification. Adopting the proposed amendment as presented would not serve the best interest of the citizens of our community.

The County would respectfully request that the Town hear the proposed UDO amendment with regards to multi-family and affordable housing at the Thursday, February 21, 2013, meeting and not the Tuesday, February 19, 2013, meeting. The County Commissioners meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, February 19, 2013, and I wish to attend the meeting in which the Town will consider this amendment. In addition, I would request permission to address the Town Board with concerns the County has over the proposed amendment change.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact the County Manager or me. The County looks forward to partnering with the Town to provide a workable solution to the issue of affordable housing.

Thank you for your assistance with this important matter.

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