

County Follows Up on Threat to Town

Written by Gary Childers

Wednesday, 17 April 2013 07:28

As the Watauga County Commissioners met at the courthouse to deliberate the passage of a resolution that would change the distribution of sales tax in the county from per capita to ad valorem basis, Boone's Town Council waited to start their meeting across town until they learned the outcome of the Commissioners vote. This action would reduce the county's allocation to Boone by approximately 2 million dollars annually.

Before holding their vote on the proposal to change the distribution method each Commissioner took opportunity to elaborate on why he did or didn't support the proposal. Democratic Commissioners John Welch and Billy Kennedy both indicated that they had not been given information they should have received and what had transpired with Commission Chair Nathan Miller meeting with individuals of other town governmental bodies in the county was not transparent governmental practice. They also questioned whether the change in tax distribution was due to a need for the county to be more equitable in its distribution or if it was a vendetta against Boone's Town Council. "I also thought we were talking about tax issues and how that works for everybody in the county. And all of a sudden we're back talking about the high school sale, so to me, I'm kind of confused--or maybe not--as to what the motive is behind this. Whether it's good fiscal governance or just pay-back."

Republican Commissioners David Blust, Nathan Miller, and Perry Yates each spoke to their frustration with Boone Town Council's policies, especially recently passed Section 175 of the building code, that they believe caused developer Phil Templeton to withdraw his offer to buy and develop the old high school property. Their contention was that this and other similar overly restrictive codes caused the citizens of the county to lose 9 million dollars on the sale of the old high school property, Blust saying "I've never been angrier over an issue. What they did--and they did it to spite Phil Templeton and everybody knows it." They also expressed frustrations that the Town of Boone would not meet with them in an open meeting to discuss the matter. Chairman Miller stated, with supporting legal documentation from the town attorney, that the closed meeting Boone Town Council wanted was illegal. All three stated they still are willing to meet with Boone Council but only in a public meeting. The motion was made to change the sales tax distribution to ad valorem basis but not send it to Raleigh until the last day possible which is April 30th. This action would provide time for the two governing bodies to meet on the issue, should they choose to do so, before the action becomes finalized. The motion passed by a vote of 3 to 2 with Commissioners Welch and Kennedy voting against

Upon learning of the Commissioners 3 to 2 vote to change the sales tax distribution to ad valorem basis the Town Council went into closed session to discuss their response. When they emerged from the closed session Mayor Loretta Clawson read from a prepared statement which had been approved by the full Council, "We hope that the county will reconsider, and that the county commissioners will also reconsider their threat of legal action and the change in the sales tax distribution." The statement went on to list 10 items the Council wanted shared that provided additional background information and clarified misinformation that had been shared publicly. The Council, with supporting documentation from its attorney also, contented that their request for mediation and closed session meetings were appropriate and legal.

During his comments about the conflict between the Commissioners and Town Council over whether to have a public or closed meeting Chairman Miller stated; "We've had a high stakes game of poker going recently". The question now is: Are all bets in or are there still more cards to be played?

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