

Boone Calls for Mediation Over Tax Threat

Written by Steve Frank
Wednesday, 03 April 2013 14:12

The Town of Boone, in a letter to the press today, is formally requesting mediation with the Watauga County Commissioners, that as the threat of changing the distribution of state sales tax on the part of the County Commission appears to have hit home for the town. The Town of Boone release, a letter signed by mayor Clawson, is asking for the mediation “for the sole purpose of reaching some agreement in regard to the old high school property.” The town said it is sending a letter to its more than 17,700 citizens asking them to support the mediation and to contact the commissioners regarding the threat of an annual \$2 million loss in sales tax revenues made by Watauga County Commissioner Chairman Nathan Miller. If approved, the revenue cut would be effective July 1, 2013. The commissioners have already heard the cries, with Andy Mason appearing before the commissioners as a private citizen to ask the county not to take such punitive action against the town. Mason, notably, is the husband of Boone Council member Lynn Mason. The town of Boone release points out that the threat comes at the same time the state legislature is considering changes that could further cut the town’s revenues by as much as \$1 million. The letter states, “The shortfall would force the Town to severely cut or discontinue many programs and services. These could include snow removal, street maintenance, police and fire protection, sidewalk maintenance and expansion, as well as other services. There would be no more greenway construction or nonprofit support. Of course, a tax increase would have to be considered.” While the Town says it is not aware of any open or official meeting of the Watauga County Commissioners to discuss a change in how sales taxes are distributed to local municipalities, state law requires the county to make any changes before the end of April. According to the letter signed by Mayor Loretta Clawson, “While all of us on the Council would like to work with the County Commissioners to find a mutually beneficial solution (to the high school property), we’re disappointed that bullying tactics have been used. County Commission Chairman Nathan Miller, in a recent meeting, expressed his displeasure that the town took action on new housing standards that most probably would kill the sale of the old High School property, currently in due diligence, taking on the issue at a time the county commissioners were also meeting, negating his opportunity to address the town on the matter. The Town release says it has requested specifics about those concerns in regard to the old high school property, but has not received what it calls, “a satisfactory response.”

The letter, as sent: The Town of Boone is formally requesting mediation with the Watauga County Commissioners for the sole purpose of reaching some agreement in regard to the old high school property, and is sending a letter to its more than 17,700 citizens asking them to support the mediation and to contact the commissioners regarding the threat of an annual \$2 million loss in sales tax revenues made by Watauga County Commissioner Chairman Nathan Miller. If approved, the revenue cut would be effective July 1, 2013.

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According to the letter signed by Mayor Loretta Clawson, “While all of us on the Council would like to work with the County Commissioners to find a mutually beneficial solution (to the high school property), we’re disappointed that bullying tactics have been used. As elected officials with our citizens’ best interests in mind, we are requesting mediation with the Commissioners for the sole purpose of exploring how we can reach some agreement.”

Several years before an offer was extended on the old high school property, a 2030 Master Plan – with input from both elected officials and a wide spectrum of community members – provided recommended guidelines for growth. According to the Town of Boone, that Plan helps ensure Boone benefits from balanced growth that includes economic development without sacrificing the way of life and character of Boone that attracted so many people here to begin with. The letter cites a U.S. News & World Report article that named Boone as one of the 10 best places to retire in 2012.*

According to the letter, “The Plan’s goal is to enable Boone to be an attractive place for people of all ages to live and work. What we need now – and for the future – is housing for people, especially families, who want to work in our community.”

But views on how to do that clashed when Boone’s Affordable Housing Task Force, a group that has been addressing how to expand housing options for moderate-income, “work force” families, recommended an ordinance they thought would encourage family housing. During a public hearing on the matter, Mr. Miller and the developer’s attorney expressed concerns about aspects that could have restricted development of the old high school property.

In response, the Town significantly amended the proposed ordinance. The Mayor’s letter states, “The provisions do not apply to the old high school property as long as the developer provides financial assurance that the commercial portion of the project is built. It’s also important to note the Town has set aside 150,000 gallons of scarce water resources for the project.”

Since then, Mr. Miller has expressed to Boone Town Council members that the amended ordinance is not acceptable. The Town has requested specifics about those concerns in regard to the old high school property, but has not received what it calls, “a satisfactory response.”

What does Boone want? According to the letter, “In addition to being citizens of Boone, each of us is a citizen of Watauga County. We really are all in this together. We hope you’ll encourage your Commissioners to work toward a solution and withdraw the threat of redirecting millions of dollars as we make decisions that will benefit our entire community.”

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