Our Forum

Much-improved plan for Grange at 10Main

Further evidence that elections matter came last week with Joseph Luter IV's voluntary two-thirds reduction of the scope of his controversial Grange at 10Main mixed-use development on the edge of Smithfield's historic district.

Luter, to be clear, could have plowed ahead with the 267-home plan approved by three Town Council members in December 2023, but town taxpayers' funding of the development's signature feature, a permanent farmers market, was dead on arrival with an overhauled council that was elected in November with a clear mandate from voters to control residential growth.

The farmers market remains in Luter's new plan as presented to the Town Council last week, but it is otherwise radically different: just 93 homes and no apartments. A much-needed three-story, 100-room hotel remains in the plan.

Legacy matters to the Luter family, especially Joseph Luter III, whose benevolence over the years has made Smithfield immeasurably better, the envy of small towns throughout Virginia and beyond. As Luter IV noted in his presentation to Town Council members last week, the family had no intention of upsetting townsfolk with their plans for the Grange. The latest revision is a clear and welcomed effort to mend fences.

And it likely reflects some realization of economic realities in the year since the prior Grange plan was approved. Luter IV is a smart businessman who wants the project to be viable.

For the first time since he and his father purchased the former Pierceville property off Main Street and Route 10, there's a lot more to like than dislike in the new plan, and we urge the Planning Commission and Town Council to get to work quickly vetting it and making a decision.

The sticking point could still be taxpayer participation in the proposed farmers market, although it was significant that Luter IV, when asked directly by Town Councilman Darren Cutler, stopped just short of saying that the market is essential to the Grange moving forward. We sensed just a tiny bit of wiggle room.

Cutler and two other newcomers said unequivocally during the election campaign that they did not support a prior council's 2022 commitment to match the Luter family's offer of $1 million and land with $1.4 million in taxpayer money to help fund the farmers market's construction. The Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors also pledged $1.4 million in 2022, and voted recently to make good on that commitment by transferring the money to the county's Economic Development Authority.

The new Town Council took the step last month of appointing a committee to study the future of the farmers market. Its chair? Councilman Jeff Brooks, who opposed rezoning and special use permits for the bigger Grange proposal when it was approved 3-2 by a shorthanded Town Council in December 2023.

Luter IV's good-faith proposal to reduce the project's housing density and donate the freed-up greenspace to the town puts the ball squarely back in the council's court.