Again with emphasis: Infrastructure is inadequate

Dispatches from Wharf Hill

By Steve Stewart



Steve Bowman nailed it in October 2022 when he declared the 800-plus-home Mallory Pointe residential development a worthy project that was ill-timed.

Bowman, speaking at a candidate forum before the November Town Council election, noted the already-overwhelmed intersection of Battery Park and Nike roads, then addressed more broadly infrastructure inadequacies for the housing growth that elected and appointed leadership had approved.

"Quite honestly, we really need to look at the infrastructure in place before we start deciding as far as increased development is concerned, to make sure we don't overly burden the citizens that have been here in the Town of Smithfield for many, many years to the benefit of developers," Bowman said.

Such common-sense leadership was craved by citizens, who a month later made Bowman the top vote-getter in the election.

Curiously, two Smithfield planning commissioners recently accused this newspaper of misinformation, presumably because I frequently make the same point as Bowman.

Any serious discussion of infrastructure in this community has to begin with roads, then pivot to public schools. On both counts, Smithfield and northern Isle of Wight are simply unprepared for the residential growth that the ruling class has allowed to occur, with more on the way.

Drive any of the following from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. or 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. on a weekday and you'd never know you live in the "quaint" and "small-town atmosphere" that the town and county crow about on their websites: Battery Park Road, Nike Park Road, Titus Creek, Route 10 bypass, Benns Church Boulevard, Carrollton Boulevard and Brewers Neck Boulevard. The congestion refutes any assertion of adequate infrastructure for preserving the lifestyle most of us chose when deciding to live in Smithfield, or in the case of natives, to stay here.

Tom Pope, once our favorite planning commissioner, hasn't been the same since Town Attorney Bill Riddick dressed him down last year for simply asking about a developer's expectation of taxpayer subsidies for the Grange at 10Main. Pope used to ask the tough, important questions, but no more.

In his oddly passionate defense of the community's infrastructure, he washed his hands of all accountability for roads, declaring those a VDOT responsibility.

That the town and county make decisions in vacuums, rather than collaboratively on behalf of a northern Isle of Wight community that functions without geographic boundaries, is a big reason we're in the predicament we're in: unable to absorb current and pending growth without further damaging our proud way of life.

Planning Commissioner Charles Bryan, who, thankfully, has succeeded Pope as a voice of reason and wisdom on that body, understands what Pope doesn't. Smart communities engage VDOT and other partners for solutions to their problems, rather than throw their hands up and say, "Oh, well. Not our responsibility."

Noting the "rapid development" that is "quickly creating an urban-like Mercury Boulevard" on Route 17 and Route 10, Bryan, in a recent letter to the editor of the Times, urged community leaders to press VDOT to fix a "woefully inadequate" six-year improvement plan.

"Due to rapid development, traffic is growing very quickly," he wrote. "It is quite reasonable to see the congestion will become unmanageable in two to three years."

Amen.

Smart leadership would have left no stone unturned in finding a way to direct traffic from the Grange onto Route 10 and keep it off Grace Street, the historic district's residential jewel, whose character will be destroyed by Grange-related traffic.

"VDOT won't allow it," citizens were told over and over, town leadership unwilling to lift a finger to convince the state to do precisely what it did a mile south at the Cypress Creek subdivision and to ask the developer, a very wealthy man whose company was the sitting governor's largest donor in the 2021 election, to help fund it.

Using their same logic that roads are a VDOT problem, town leaders must believe that schools are a county problem, because growth that the town has approved will require school construction that no one has any idea how to pay for, much less a plan to achieve — another example of the town's operating in a vacuum.

So to Dr. Pope, we say, respectfully but firmly, Steve Bowman was right in 2022 and so are we today: This community's infrastructure cannot support the rapid growth its leaders have permitted, assuming the town and county are being honest about wanting to preserve the small-town lifestyle most of us cherish.

To Pope's sidekick Bill Davidson, who wants "recourse" against this newspaper, do what you must. We will continue to state what's obvious to everyone but the leaders making bad decisions.

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