To accept $6M or not: a question with nuance

Dispatches from Wharf Hill



By Steve Stewart

Even in our current world of absolutes, with little room allowed to ponder shades of gray, the following can all be simultaneously true:

• Joe Luter III is our community's greatest benefactor and meant well with his offer of $6 million if the town matches it and meets certain conditions.

• Requiring skin in the game from others is not unusual when Mr. Luter donates money. The streetscaping that sparked Downtown Smithfield's revitalization is an example of the good that can come from such partnerships.

• Protocol has never been much of a concern for Mr. Luter. Putting a million bucks in the town's bank account before the Town Council knew, or much less agreed to, its conditions is quintessential Joe Luter.

• If Joe Luter III were in his prime, dirt would long ago have been moving at the Grange at 10Main, such is the respect he has earned in his town.

• Joe Luter IV is not his father, doesn't command near the same level of respect, and to date has been unwilling to do the things required to earn it in modern Smithfield. The Grange at 10Main is a Luter IV project.

• Unlike Luter III's prior philanthropy in Smithfield, this $6 million gift, if the town agrees to meet its first condition, will cause financial benefit for his family. There's a reason that moving the Smithfield Farmers Market to the Grange tops his list of conditions. It is the essential vehicle for taxpayer subsidization of the larger development. $2.8 million has already been pledged by the town and county, and there's good reason to believe more will be sought.

• Luter IV has been eyeing taxpayer participation in the Grange from the beginning, and he won't give up easily.

• If the circumstances of Luter's offering the town $6 million are as noble as Steve Bowman described, it's hard to imagine how the mayor could have more badly bungled his handling of it.

• Bowman's temper is getting the best of him. Of his two political bedfellows, he needs to act a lot more like Randy Pack, who is cool as a cucumber, and less like Bill Riddick during Town Council meetings.

• Bowman is on the Town Council today because his predecessor as mayor, Carter Williams, lacked the emotional intelligence required of the person who holds the gavel for a small town's governing body. Williams was gruff and condescending as citizens began to push back against unchecked residential growth. He paid the price in the next election. Many citizens would like to have Williams back after Bowman's tantrum in the June 10 Town Council meeting.

• In a weak-mayor form of government like Smithfield's, Bowman's personally directing $6 million into the town's account before even consulting with his Town Council colleagues is chutzpah that is rewarded in law enforcement, but often punished in politics, where citizens, not the man with the badge, are ultimately in charge.

• Bowman, if indeed he was caught completely by surprise by the offer of $6 million while on a social visit, as he contended in his original email to Town Council colleagues, should have said: "Thank you very much, Mr. Luter. That's very generous. Our town manager will be in touch to let you know what is needed in order for the Town Council to consider your kind offer."

• If Bowman's alternative, contradictory account — that he went to Florida for the purpose of seeing a man who wanted to give money to the town he loves — Town Council colleagues should be even more miffed about being kept in the dark for weeks.

• Those conflicting accounts will haunt Bowman until he is more forthcoming about how the whole trip went down. Many citizens aren't buying that the entire trip was planned without his receiving or sending a single email or text message to anybody, as the town has asserted in its Freedom of Information Act responses.

• Bowman, in botching the optics of the Luter donation, has done no favors for the two interim council members he and his colleagues handpicked to maintain their fleeting grip on power. Jim Collins and Raynard Gibbs will likely be asked, prior to November's election, to vote to spend $6 million of taxpayer money on largely cosmetic projects during a time when the town has fundamental infrastructure needs and no way to pay for them. That vote wouldn't sit well with an already restless electorate.

• Luter's donation merits serious consideration. Because of the conditions attached, it should not be accepted blindly. Careful analysis, beginning with the merits of the farmers market project itself, is essential.

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