

# A Policy of Smoke and Mirrors

## Council-majority Fears the Wisdom of its Own Constituents

By: S.G. Powers III

It's bad enough that the majority of town council has shown no faith in the power of a comprehensive master plan that, if done properly, could pull us all together and create consensus among us. But to add insult to injury, the anti-planning majority on council is trying to pull the wool over our eyes about its true motives.

We assume the misguided force behind the group's doublespeak is Alan "Smarty Growth" Gilbert. But we're puzzled by the role of Jerry Johnson, who finds himself—wittingly or not—at the center of the smoke and mirrors, and about now, maybe we can help him figure it out.

Before being elected to the council fifteen months ago, along with Gilbert and Clark, Johnson was the chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z). Back then he led and helped to shape a three-year effort to update and revise the 1997 CAMA land-use plan. At that time, Johnson was an advocate of responsible growth and public involvement. Or so it seemed.

But something happened to Johnson once he was elected to the council. He shed his rational thinking like a snake shedding its skin and started a behind the scenes campaign among the council leadership to adopt height limitations throughout the town, all without public participation.

He quietly circulated among the council majority, several unsigned height-revision plans, which in its flawed wisdom the council sent along to the P&Z with a mandate that it select one – a multiple-choice of sorts. The P&Z refused to do so and asked instead, for some rationales to support the height proposals. So, in something of a panic, the council sent the height proposals along to the town's planning staff, asking them to come up

with some rationales. Surely they could conjure up something that would at least sound good, so the council figured. But when staff couldn't arrive at any legitimate basis, this left the majority voice of council befuddled. After tossing this increasingly hot potato back and forth to P&Z, staff, and council, it died a timely death. But this inept attempt to circumvent sound planning principles serves as an example of council majority's methods and intentions.

### **Council Majority "Courageously" Challenged**

Planners repeatedly say it takes courage for elected officials to open up a planning process to all stakeholders in a community because everybody will have to compromise (including the officials) to reach a consensus. Despite their talk to the contrary, our council leadership seems to lack this level of courage. Let's just say they're, well, "courageously" challenged. They prefer to make these decisions themselves. Sadly, they don't much trust the rest of us.

**While most support height limitations, we'd like to see them put in place based on our collective wisdom and that of expert community planners, who can lead us through this mine field of individual interests and pull us together for our common good and for the future health and vitality of our community.** We see height limitations as one part of a far larger comprehensive planning process, *a process that we want to pursue without prejudice.* This effort by Johnson and his compatriots to circumvent public input reveals much about the forces at play, but it's only a first glimpse of an even bigger mystery involving Jerry Johnson that further exposes what the council majority is seeking.

This deeper mystery emerged in full blossom when some months ago "Smarty Growth"

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Gilbert proposed the idea of forming a new citizen's committee to "reexamine" the earlier three-year effort to revise and update the 1997 land-use plan mentioned above. **Gilbert called for more public input this time around.** Remember, Johnson personally headed this work as chairman of P&Z. You'd think he might have simply passed along to Gilbert and Clark the particulars of all of this work, but instead he joined them and voted to establish an entirely new committee.

When asked the precise purpose of the committee, Johnson stated that it was to compare the recommendations originally proposed by the P&Z, which he chaired at the time, and any subsequent amendments proposed by the previous town council majority, who Johnson, Gilbert, and Clark defeated at the polls. One wonders why this "comparison" justifies a new committee?

### **1997 Land-Use Plan Review Process**

Estimates vary, but the three-year CAMA land-use plan update process involved at least 2,000 person-hours at a taxpayer cost of thousands of dollars. Citizens attended meetings and gave their input. Professional perspectives were employed from the Cape Fear Council of Governments, among others. The effort was extensive and exhaustive. Why would the current council majority, including one of the key figures who actually oversaw the review process, vote for such a committee? That's the rub.

While it's no reflection on those who served, the committee was apparently an attempt by council majority to divert their constituents from their true motive - more smoke and mirrors. So, what does council majority want? Before answering, let's look at the actual work of the new committee.

Did the committee stick to what we were publicly told was its charge? **No.** Did it involve the public in open discussion? **No.** Were decisions based on studies and research data? **No.** Then again, few of us ever expected that was the true plan. Instead the committee, seemingly with the council majority's blessing, ceremoniously voted to discard all the amendments that had been decided during the previous land-use plan review process. And they did so without any review or meaningful public input. They then went on to tear into the plan proposed by P&Z and its chairman, Johnson, and cherry-picked hot topic policies, resulting in votes for substantive and dramatic changes.

**All of this was done without public involvement, in three two-hour meetings, unlike the multi-year process the committee's actions overturned** Why the smoke and mirrors? The answer is easy: To get CBD height limits into the land-use plan with the hope of limiting discussion about the matter when we finally get around to working on a comprehensive master plan.

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