

WHERE'S THE PLAN ?

“Alan Gilbert, who won a four-year seat on the Town Council, said growth became a central issue in the town long before campaigning started.

The debate goes back more than a year when the current Town Council approved developers’ requests to rezone property. Instead, Mr. Gilbert said, the council should have created a master plan for the town before reviewing development proposals, Mr. Gilbert said.

By kicking out all three incumbents Tuesday, voters voiced support for creating a long-range plan that maintains the appeal of Carolina Beach but allows it to go forward, he said.”

Wilmington Star-News Election Coverage – 2005

Planning, as we can see from the quotations above, became a central issue in the most recent election. Yet, with a new majority on Council, where does the Town of Carolina Beach currently stand in its planning process?

Land Use Plan Update

After almost three years of work involving the Planning & Zoning Commission, Council, town staff, and the town attorney, our Land Use Plan update, which was approved by the previous administration, is ready for submission to the Coastal Resources Commission. Yet, despite direction and guidance from the Cape Fear Council of Governments, tens of thousands of taxpayers’ dollars spent, and a tremendous number of man-hours, the plan sits in limbo.

After all of this work, Councilman Gilbert has pushed through the appointment of a “review

subcommittee” to study the plan and recommend changes. In other words, the new majority doesn’t think the language in the plan supports their agenda, so they appear ready to supplant the years-long process by appointing like-minded people to change the plan to suit their own special interests. Even worse, this will further delay the process and increase the costs to taxpayers.

Under the town’s system of government, the Planning & Zoning Commission is, in fact, the Council’s subcommittee charged with working on these issues. This new majority appears intent on going around that process in order to achieve their own specific agenda. What’s worse, one

of their members, Councilman Johnson, was the Chairman of the Planning & Zoning Commission throughout the Land Use Plan update process, and signed off on all the updates, changes, and recommendations within the plan submitted to council.

So what has changed that Councilman Johnson now wants to see another panel review and amend his previous recommendations?

By appointing members to a subcommittee who have little to no knowledge of the Land Use Plan, or the years of work that created it, the new majority places themselves in a position to “guide” the amendment process in order to arrive at a document that suits their agenda. In the process, they will throw out years of work and thousands of taxpayer dollars.

The Master Plan

Full of election-night hubris, Alan Gilbert offered his assessment of the previous council’s most blatant failure – “The council should have created a master plan.” Now, nine months into his administration, with a clear majority on the Council, where is the town’s master plan?

How many projects has this new board reviewed without such a plan in place?

On May 24th of this year, the Planning & Zoning Commission met to discuss heights in various districts throughout the town. Now-Councilman Gilbert was present at that meeting, and “challenged” his own board to pursue state monies to develop a master plan, urging the Planning & Zoning Commission to recommend the town hire a professional consultant to help address a variety of issues that would be central to the master plan.

The Commission made such a request, but when the issue came before Council, they only wanted the height issue addressed. Unfortunately, after the town put the subject out to bid, only two professionals responded, and there is currently discussion that the consultants might be too expensive – and staff is now considering tackling the project in-house.

It became clear in that height discussion that Councilman Gilbert is not interested in the past reasoning that ultimately resulted in the current height limits. He appears to be perfectly content pulling a number out of a hat, encouraging staff or his board-appointees to endorse it, and calling it a day.

During the campaign, Gilbert promised a voter referendum on height limits, but since his election he has failed to make any effort toward that promise. Now, clearly, it is a decision he wants to control.

So where does that leave us?

Instead of the promised master plan, this Council is attempting to piecemeal their own vision of Carolina Beach by addressing issues individually rather than through a collective planning process. In fact, it appears this new majority is doing exactly



Buildings boarded up in the CBD

what they accused the previous administration of doing, disregarding the need for long-range planning.

The Land Use Plan Update is stalled, the so-called master plan is nonexistent, and projects that could help our town progress languish because of the failure of the new majority to begin the planning process.

How will these decisions help to positively shape our future? What is the direction of Carolina Beach? And where are the plans?

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For reference: www.carolinabeach.org and www.starnewsonline.com