

Opinions

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.



Highlands, Cashiers face community challenges

Highlands and Cashiers sit above most of Western North Carolina, both geographically and economically. That does not make them immune to societal trends. The Macon County town of Highlands is more than 4,100 feet above sea level. Cashiers, an unincorporated community in Jackson County, is at nearly 3,500 feet. By comparison, Asheville averages slightly over 2,100. The main access points are U.S. 64 from Franklin to Highlands and State Road 107 from Sylva to Cashiers. The former is particularly convoluted, running just outside Bridal Veil Falls near Highlands. I can recall when the road went behind the falls, which must have been when I first visited the Smoky Mountains in 1951, while a rising freshman in high school.

Each community is considered a tourist area though, as elsewhere in Western North Carolina, the tourist season is getting longer. When I visited Highlands recently, I had to circle the primary shopping block of Main Street three times before finding a parking space.

Both communities also are notable for their affluence. The Highlands area has seven residential country club communities and there are several more in the Cashiers area (incidentally, many locals ignore the “i” when pronouncing Cashiers.)

The first time my wife and I visited Highlands, in the 1970s, she decided to check out an auction house, expecting something like the ten-cent specials at Fred Burrell’s auction barn west of Bryson City. She came back out quickly, muttering something about four-figure starting bids.

With money comes influence. It is widely believed that one reason Macon County has been expanding its airport near Franklin is to allow rich people from Highlands to land their private jets there. The officially stated reason is to facilitate economic development.

Affluence also allows the two communities, which together have only a bit more than 1,000 year-round residents, to have their own hospital. Highlands-Cashiers Hospital on U.S. 64 between the two communities, has 24 beds for acute care and 80 beds in the Eckerd Living Center.

Each community has its own library and Highlands has a performing-arts center, a visual arts center and a playhouse. Each also has its own K-12 school. You don’t see those schools, Highlands and Blue Ridge, mentioned in the sports pages during the fall because neither has enough students to field a football team.

The schools are not going to go away. The commute over twisting hilly roads is too long to make it practical to bus students into Sylva or Franklin. But what about the hospital?

The Highlands-Cashiers Hospital Foundation had assets of nearly \$20 million at the end of 2016. It has routinely used investment income to cover operating deficits, which have been estimated as high as \$5 million a year. That arrangement may be imperiled if Mission Health, which has owned the hospital since 2014, is sold to for-profit HCA Health Care.

“Some people are wondering what the outcome is of this happening,” Highlands Mayor Patrick Taylor said. “I’d say that they’d hate to see the community assets be lost through a for-profit corporation.”

Taylor worries it will be more difficult to justify keeping Highlands-Cashiers open without foundation support. “It’s difficult to keep a hospital of that size operational. The money just isn’t there,” he said.

The sale agreement presumably will obligate HCA to keep all of Mission’s hospitals open for five years. After that, according to Mission CEO Ron Paulus, if a hospital has lost money for two consecutive years despite reasonable efforts by HCA, the company could offer it for sale. A hospital could be closed only if no buyer steps forward, he said.

In announcing the merger with Mission four years ago, Charlie Sheehan, chair of the Highlands-Cashiers directors, stressed the importance of “an organization that would maintain local governance.” That was then, this is now.”

Bill McGoun is a contributing editor for the ACT Editorial Board. He lives in Bryson City.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A kinder, gentler presidential legacy

We are all saddened by the passing of President George Bush.

He was a man of valor and integrity who put the United States of America above his own self interests. His remarkable life and career were exemplary in every way. He was a true gentleman.

What a contrast to Donald Trump, a buffoon, a bully, a narcissist, who seems to care about nothing above protecting his own fragile ego. What if, in honor of the memory of President Bush, the press did not mention Donald Trump for a week? Just imagine.

Audrey Bayer, Asheville

Charlotte Street plan is wrong in both lanes

I have been a cycling infrastructure advocate and an avid cyclist until my body told me it was time to quit. However, I am appalled at plans to convert Charlotte Street to two lanes of car traffic from four to make room for bike lanes.

Taking road real estate away from one mode of transportation and giving it to another will lead to divisiveness and a backlash against cycling similar to Portland or Atlanta. Cyclists on Charlotte Street will ride through exhaust fumes of stopped cars and fuming motorists. Motorists will seek alternative routes through now quiet neighborhoods. And they will prefer to frequent business on more car-friendly streets.

A major cause of traffic on city streets is the 15 years of environmental obstructionism to the widening of I-26. The congestion on I-26 is causing numerous accidents and injuries and generation even more pollution and CO2 emissions than if the road would have been widened back when I-26 opened into Tennessee.

The lack of a comprehensive transportation plan including motor vehicles will leave the next generation of City Management problems worse than the water issues inherited from past generations.

Charles Clogston, Asheville

There’s a better way

I’m getting tired of Republican lies and devastation of America, once a Democracy, now an Oligarchy! I’m getting tired of Trump appointing incompetents to the heads of governmental departments using our hard-earned taxes to continue to enrich the one percent of so-called Americans, the billionaires and the global corporations (given so-called person-rights by the right-wing Supreme Court).

I am also tired of the Republican Administration and their puppet-masters destroying our once good name around the world. I am tired of Trump bullying our allies with tariff deals designed to backlash on We the People, the American Workers, which has been going on since Ronald Reagan and Dick Nixon. Restore pre-Reagan tax rates on high earners when the American economy was the strongest and fairest.

I propose that We the People organize to rid our-

selves of voter suppression, systemic racism, militarism, ecological devastation (of our only earth), poverty, gerrymandering, dishonest voter purges, voter ID Laws targeting people of color.

I demand that we reinstate expanding voting rights (including felons), the rights of LGBTQ, stop separating families at our borders and universal health care now.

I am for all Americans to adhere to common purpose and shared burdens, now!

Joe Cobble, Asheville

The Catholic Church must move into future

If the Catholic Church is to continue to have a positive impact in Christianity, it is going to have to move into the 21st century in terms of its policies and procedures. It could start by looking at best practices in other branches of the Christian Church.

Simply put, a very significant percentage of its present difficulties would be resolved if the church eliminated celibacy as a requirements for the priesthood. Allowing priests to explore and develop intimate relationships with other adults and to marry and have families would provide the same appropriate and healthy avenues experienced by clergy in other religious denominations. Further, as in many other denominations, the overall health of the priesthood would be strengthened if women were allowed to serve in that capacity.

In addition, Catholicism must redefine how it looks at the issue of sexuality, sexual practices, sexual orientation, gender and birth control. Hopefully individual parish priests will soon call for open discussions with their parishioners on these and other topics. To not do so, will result in a very small religious sect with very few priests and very few congregants.

Richard Boyum, Candler

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