

Tacks in the Road

By Mayor John Brodman

My two-cents worth

It's May already, and there are several things that I want to discuss, including the virus, speed limits and pedestrian safety, preparations for hurricane season, resiliency, and sales and use tax distributions. These items are relevant to the areas in our Strategic Plan covering public safety and disaster planning, infrastructure and fiscal planning. I am writing this in the middle of April, in the thick cloud of our pollen season, and while it is 75 degrees outside here, Denver had two feet of snow yesterday. May brings us some of the best weather we ever see, but it can also be a tricky transition month. It's the time of year when we usually get both more visitors and an increased potential for tropical storms. Greater numbers of visitors seem to have started early this year, or maybe they never really went away. Our shoulder seasons may be disappearing as we get new residents, and as our second-home owners and visitors spend more time here year-round. We need to be cognizant of these trends and take into account the fact that our full- and part-time populations are rising.

COVID-19. On the virus, we appear to be making some progress, but we are not out of the woods yet. A foot race seems to be going on between the pace of vaccinations and the spread of variants in several parts of the country. Federal policy still seems to be vacillating from day to day. More attention is now being paid to the potential side effects of different vaccines, the duration of the protection they provide, and possible requirements for booster shots. It's still a steep learning curve. As of mid-April, about 33% of the NC population had been at least partially vaccinated, about 25% have been fully vaccinated—and the portion of the population age 65 or older that had been fully vaccinated was approaching 70%. The state is administering about 400,000 vaccine doses per week. Closer to home, Carteret County has administered approximately 23,000 doses, and vaccination appointments are now open to everyone age 16 or over. At the state level, the seven-day average number of new cases seems to be running around 2,000 per day, and in Carteret County the average daily number appears to be around 10 per day.

Town hall remains closed to the general public, and almost all business is still being conducted remotely. Last month we asked the chairpersons of our volunteer committees to survey their members to find out who had been vaccinated. We are now starting to hold live committee meetings for small groups who have been vaccinated, with social distancing and other precautions. Attendance at all meetings is still available via webinar for those who haven't been vaccinated and for those who choose to attend remotely. As of right now, there are no plans to re-open town hall for meetings of outside groups. We are continuing to monitor the situation closely, but we believe that pursuing a "discretion is the better part of valor" policy is still our best option.

Speed limits and pedestrian safety. This has been an ongoing issue in Pine Knoll Shores for as long as I can remember. It is a fact of life that we have a 45 mph state highway running right through the middle of town for its entire length. Pedestrian safety has been a major concern of our town's government for years, and we have taken many steps to improve safety. We have installed several new crosswalks with flashing light signals and new streetlights to illuminate intersections. We have experimented with seasonal reductions in the speed limit on the east end of town, and Police Chief Ryan Thompson is a strong advocate for and supporter of the Watch for Me NC safety program. We have used concerted

efforts at every opportunity to engage the public in safety awareness campaigns promoting responsible behavior on the part of motorists and pedestrians alike. Yes, both motorists and pedestrians have responsibilities; safety isn't a one-way street. In any event, our population and numbers of visitors are exploding, and all of them are using or crossing Highway 58. All the ingredients are in place for a disaster waiting to happen, but the town board and staff have been trying to do whatever they can to prevent it.

On April 7, we convened a special meeting of the Pine Knoll Shores Board of Commissioners (BOC) to discuss this issue in depth. Chief Thompson framed the discussion with a retrospective look at our experiences over time, the actions we have taken to date, the exchanges we have had with the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT), the decision to lower the speed limit to 35 mph year-round taken by Atlantic Beach, and some factual information about golf carts and low speed vehicles (LSVs). Prior to the meeting, there were many emails and Facebook posts on the issue, and we had 14 public comments during the meeting. Every member of the BOC participated in the discussion that followed with new evidence, concerns and points of view to share. At the conclusion of the discussion, it was obvious that there were many good reasons for lowering the limit, but little rationale for keeping the limit unchanged. In the end, the commissioners unanimously passed two resolutions: 1) a request to NCDOT to lower the speed limit on Highway 58 from 45 mph to 35 mph, year-round, from the Atlantic Beach town line to the Indian Beach town line, on the condition that LSVs be prohibited from driving on Highway 58; and 2) a request to NCDOT to prohibit LSVs from driving on Highway 58 in Pine Knoll Shores.

Chief Thompson will now take these requests to NCDOT. While we will have to wait for their response, we do expect the requests will be granted. As soon as we hear back from NCDOT, and maybe even before you read this, we will send out an all-hands email with information about the implementation of the speed limit reduction. In the meantime, please remember that the speed limit on town streets is 25 mph.

In a related development, the town's citizen-based, volunteer Pedestrian Planning Group IV met for the first time on April 9 to begin the process of reviewing and updating our plans for additional infrastructure needs covering sidewalks, crosswalks, multi-use paths and a growing number of golf carts. Several people expressed the opinion that Pine Knoll Shores should simply issue a bond to pay for the completion of a sidewalk on Highway 58 through town, from border to border, and be done with it. There is still the issue of pedestrians, cyclists, strollers, etc. on our internal streets like Mimosa and Oakleaf, and a suggestion was made to simply widen the roads next time we repave to accommodate pedestrians on the shoulder. Nothing is decided at this point.

Disaster planning. Hurricane season doesn't officially start until June 1, but we did have two named storms in May last year, Tropical Storm Arthur and Hurricane Bertha. May is a good month to get ready for the coming season. Many long-term residents of Bogue Banks have learned to live with storm season preparedness as a way of life on the coast. They know what it takes to be prepared, and they think ahead and act accordingly. The county has an excellent emergency management operation, and all our municipalities have detailed operational plans for dealing with the prelude to a storm, the storm itself, and recovery efforts in the aftermath of a storm. Our plans cover critical staffing requirements, possible evacuations, treatment for special needs persons, power outages, curfews, recovery, cleanup, debris disposal and many other things. We are also aware of the need to activate the special accounting procedures required to track our expenses and storm losses, as necessary, if we ever hope to qualify for FEMA reimbursement for the losses we incur during a named-storm event.

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