

# Conversations and the art of listening

During the public comment period at last week's Orange County Board of Supervisors' meeting, a number of speakers suggested the debate over gun rights and restrictions should be an ongoing conversation.

Conversations are the free exchange of ideas. But for them to work, each side must be willing to listen to the other. Too often, we are interested only in furthering our own beliefs rather than allowing for alternative points of view, much less the capacity to change our minds and be moved from our entrenched beliefs.

Still, when genuine conversations occur—particularly on an individual basis—people often find common ground based on strongly held beliefs regarding the topic in question.

Unfortunately, divisive and difficult topics screamed across our air waves are viewed as black or white instead of the thousand shades of gray they actually are. "Conversations" at top political levels seem cast aside in favor of party allegiance and that filters down to the grassroots level.

Most disagreements can be resolved—or at least an understanding reached—through thoughtful conversation.

As communities across the state pass resolutions supporting Second Amendment rights, legislators in Richmond surely are taking notice.

Democrats feel emboldened by their legislative gains and control of the house, the senate and the executive branch. Republicans feel threatened. And citizens—Republican and Democrat—feel threatened. Because conversations aren't happening. Because leadership isn't occurring. (And no, stimulating like-minded people isn't active conversation, nor leadership.) Fear is prevailing here because we're not having open conversations about these difficult topics. Or if we are, we're choosing not to listen.

An active and engaged citizenry is critical to our governance, but just as importantly the protection and exercising of our rights. Citizens are talking. Are our legislators listening? Legislators are talking. Are our citizens listening?

Conversation is a participatory exercise. It doesn't end when one side finishes talking.

# Broadband authority working to solve a real rural need

In the first quarter of the 20th century, the elusive infrastructure was electricity. Today, it's high-speed internet.

Then, as now, there were obstacles to delivery of this critical service—chiefly cost and geography. But just as President Franklin Roosevelt would not be deterred, so too, is Orange County's broadband authority.

Last week, the county's broadband authority announced one regional and two local grant applications that would deliver high-speed internet to underserved citizens in Orange County.

Outside the Town of Orange, Lake of the Woods and select other places, most folks in Orange County lack access to high-speed internet—a critical component of modern-day life.

"It's not a luxury," Orange County Broadband Project Manager Lewis Foster noted. Indeed it's not. It's an essential. Like electricity and water. And not just for homes, but for businesses, schools and public services.

The county has a need and Foster and the authority are working to provide it. "Want to make a difference in citizens' lives? That's the broadband authority," he says. "There's a need now in the county and we want to help solve this problem."

Thank goodness.

Orange County—for all its gloriously fertile soils and rolling piedmont topography—can grow corn, soybeans and grapes. It can't grow high-speed internet. Not without help, at least.

To that end, the county has partnered with Culpeper and Madison counties for a "middle mile" line up Route 15 while submitting applications to the Department of Housing and Community Development for two projects more immediately beneficial to Orange County citizens.

Seeking to capitalize on the recent fiber line construction linking Orange County Schools, the

county hopes to leverage that connectivity to bring small-market high-speed internet providers to an area they might not otherwise consider.

After all, these areas aren't serviced now because they don't make business sense to national providers. But by investing in infrastructure and lowering the costs for smaller service providers, the county's broadband authority is leveling the playing field on behalf of its citizens.

"There's a need now for the citizens," Foster notes. "We want to help solve this problem. We want to make a difference in peoples' lives."

Investment is the key. By leveraging state, local and private dollars, the broadband authority is attempting to maximize its investment to deliver service to citizens and, ultimately, generate revenue on behalf of the county. To be trite, "it's a 'win-win.'"

We all benefit from high-speed internet, just as our parents and grandparents benefitted from universal access to electricity. The medium may have changed, but the value and impact has not. High-speed internet is our modern-day electrification. And just as our governmental localities subsidize those operations, so too should they this.

These VATI applications are due Sept. 3. Let's hope in three months we hear we've gotten these grants; in five months we put them out to bid and this time next year, we have underserved homes in rural Orange County connected to high-speed internet.

# Dollar General wouldn't budge, but neither would we

Facing its first test, the Barboursville Village Overlay District passed with flying colors.

Three years ago, the Orange County Board of Supervisors and the Orange County Planning Commission held countless work sessions, town hall meetings and public hearings to craft the Barboursville Village Overlay District (BVOD).

The district fulfills objectives outlined in the county comprehensive plan by providing standards to protect and enhance the character of the area which complement the requirements of the underlying zoning districts. Proposed regulations are intended to foster a higher standard of non-residential building design and site design respectful of the cultural and historic nature of Barboursville and produce development that complements the character of the area.

Last month, a Tennessee developer appeared before the Orange County Planning Commission proposing a Dollar General store on a 1.235-acre parcel at the intersection of Route 20 and Route 33.

However, the store he was proposing was well beyond the size permitted within the district.

While the developer offered a number of design and landscaping concessions to help the store fit the BVOD, Dollar General was unyielding in the size of the proposed store.

That, coupled with public outcry, made it easy for the planning commission to recommend denial of the project.

Before the proposed rezoning and special use permit could be heard before the board of supervisors, the applicant withdrew the project. Regardless of how many concessions were made in terms of design and landscaping, their unwillingness to even consider a smaller store size was—in the end—a deal breaker for both sides.

Dollar General said the store had to be 9,100 square-feet and the county said it couldn't. The district has a limit. Don't ask for more than that. It's a pretty simple equation.

Had the commission—or, ultimately, the board—wavered at all on that point, they'd have rendered the BVOD worthless and sent the message not that the county was “open for business,” but that it was open for *any* business in *any* place, regardless of location, appropriateness, suitability or compatibility.

Instead, the county held firm to what it said was important.

But it's not just this Dollar General application. The county sent a message to future developers and projects that if they want to locate in either the BVOD or the Germanna Wilderness Area, they need to bring projects that acknowledge the priorities established in those guidelines and respect the impact of what they're requesting.

Too often in the past, it seemed like we'd get blinded by the prospect and promise of commercial development—regardless of its location or compatibility. We'd see the opportunity for new jobs and tax revenue and think we'd be helping instead of hurting. Thank goodness we've learned there are appropriate projects in appropriate places and not every project is good for the county—despite the most sincere assurances from the developer.

We want economic growth and development. We *need* it. But we're at the point where we can say what we want where and stick to it for the sake of protecting our existing resources and assets. And, that is something.

When the proposed Dollar General developer stood before the planning commission last month, he knew the only area his project didn't comply with the BVOD was the size of the store. The commission asked him multiple times if that was negotiable. Each time he said it wasn't. By the end of the evening, the outcome was clear to everyone in the room—Dollar General wouldn't budge and thank goodness, neither would we.