

EDITORIAL

Should other county leaders decide our fate?

In 1969, the counties of Madison, Greene and Orange got together to create a regional water and sewer partnership: Rapidan Service Authority (RSA). This made sense, financially, considering the populations at that time. Greene had roughly 5,248 residents, Madison had 8,638 residents and Orange had 13,792 residents. Today, Greene is sitting at nearly 20,000 residents, Madison at 13,261 and Orange at 37,000.

Each of the three counties operates independently with their own boards of supervisors deciding what's best for their own counties. The residents of Madison and Orange elect their leaders the same way we do in Greene. The supervisors in each county answer to the residents in that county without influence or interference from supervisors of other counties, until now.

Each county has two supervisor-appointed representatives on the RSA Board of Members, which oversees RSA. While those representatives do not have to be supervisors, three of them are: Jim Crozier and Lee Frame are both Orange County supervisors and Bill Martin is a Greene County supervisor. Greene's other representative on the board is Ron Williams, a planning commissioner. Madison County representatives are Troy Coppage, president of E.A. Clore Furniture and fire chief of Madison County Volunteer Fire Company, and Steve Hoffman, a former Madison supervisor.

In July, the RSA board voted 4-2 (with Greene representatives voting against) to fundamentally change the way Greene structured financing for the Greene County Water Treatment and Reservoir Project, and placing RSA in charge of the planning and control of it which was nearly ready to break ground.

RSA and Greene County were in agreement for years on the need for and direction of the project, but somewhere that changed. All the engineering drawings are finished and awaiting RSA signature, land purchased by the county for the reservoir and bonds purchased by Greene for streambank credits. Greene County has spent more than \$11 million on this project.

And now leaders from other counties have ended that project for Greene County.

Why? That's the million (literally) dollar question right now. Something has happened between 2018 when we sat down with the general manager of RSA, who agreed that the project was a necessity, and today. We don't know what and, unfortunately, with the contentious atmosphere between the Greene County Board of Supervisors and the management and board of RSA, we're not getting an answer to that question.

The Greene County Board of Supervisors has countered with a threat of a lawsuit against RSA, as well.

Everyone should have been on the same page going into the meetings this summer as the county requested final signatures and increases on the facility fee to fund the project. That's been the funding plan since 2017. Yet, the representatives of other counties have killed the project and plan that Greene developed across two decades with input—and not always kind input—from residents of Greene County. This project has no impact on either Madison or Orange counties or their residents. All work is paid for by the users of the water system in Greene and a portion of the real estate taxes from all residents in the county.

Can you imagine how the two Orange County supervisors would feel if Greene and Madison halted projects inside their county? The authority was not established so neighboring counties could influence the choices made by leaders elected by their own constituents. This essentially silences the voice of the people of a particular county. We elected our supervisors, we are the ones impacted by their decisions and we are the ones they answer to, not to anyone in Madison or Orange counties.

We don't know if getting out of RSA is in the best interest of Greene County, but it feels like remaining in the partnership isn't in the best interest of Greene County residents.

EDITORIAL

Tourism helps support our county

In a 2002 editorial, the *Greene County Record* told officials that it would take some effort and initiative to lure tourists to the area. The editorial recognized the need for tourism for economic development and to take some of the tax burden off the residents themselves. Looking at the numbers for the past year, it seems Greene County has been successful in this regard. According to the Virginia Tourism Corporation report, tourists spent more than \$22 million in Greene County in 2019, which is a 5.8% jump over 2018.

We live in a beautiful area in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. With rolling hills and pasture land, western Greene County's viewsheds are breathtaking. Greene County officials have made a conscious effort to turn our geographic asset into economic development through tourism, and it's paid off with a 22% increase in tourist spending over the past five years and a 20% increase in local tax receipts.

Who wouldn't want to spend a weekend peeping at the fall foliage in the beauty of Greene County?

As Greene County grows, demands for services by citizens grow, too. One way the county accomplishes the funding of those demands, as well as take some of the tax burden off residents, is through a 5% transient occupancy tax on those who stay in hotels, motels, lodges, cabins, tree houses—any short-term lodging. Additionally, there is a 4% meals tax. In 2019, \$630,019 in local tax receipts came into Greene County coffers, which is a 5.7% increase over 2018.

We don't want Greene County to become Northern Virginia—that's a statement that's been spoken recently at many meetings. We agree. We'd hate to see Greene even become more like Albemarle County. We cannot lose our rural countryside, our mountain heritage, our agricultural heritage—we need a balance between economic and residential growth and amenities while protecting who we were are at our cores.

There has to be a way to protect that as we face the changes we see coming in the near future. Greene faces serious funding issues with water and sewer infrastructure, aging government facilities and school buildings, additional law enforcement personnel and needed upgrades for emergency services.

Greene has a finite amount of funding for these projects, and others. We think additional tourism revenue in Greene can actually help us preserve the rural nature of the majority of our county. We also need other business development opportunities to help fund our major projects coming sooner rather than later.

The county must continue to make tourism a priority, and seek other business opportunities, or we'll lose what makes Greene County a truly special place to live. And visit.

EDITORIAL

The holidays are not canceled

Thanksgiving—while it may be altered—is not canceled. It may look different than the Norman Rockwell painting with everyone gathered closely to inspect the turkey, but that doesn't mean we can't be grateful.

Do you still have your job? **Be grateful.**

Can you afford to pay your utilities and your rent or mortgage? **Be grateful.**

Are you able to feed your family? **Be grateful.**

Are you healthy and free of COVID-19? **Be grateful.**

Has your family been spared from the coronavirus? **Be grateful.**

Now, you will need to take all that gratefulness into the Christmas and Hanukkah season because things might just get worse for the next several weeks, causing alterations for those holidays as well.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” is the oft-used quote by Spanish philosopher George Santayana. Here we are—in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic—repeating it.

In early fall, professors and researchers at Virginia Tech and St. Louis University studied the 1918 influenza epidemic to glean what lessons we should have learned that we could use to combat COVID-19.

“Despite all of the medical advances of the past century, beating today's COVID-19 pandemic comes down to nearly the same challenge as the 1918 influenza epidemic,” said Ron Fricker, a senior associate dean in the College of Science at Virginia Tech and a professor of statistics. “Until we have a vaccine, it's all about people modifying their behavior—wearing masks, washing their hands and social distancing.”

Did you know the United States shut down in 1918 and in Virginia schools and churches closed? Did you know there were mask mandates then, too? Were you aware that the government had trouble convincing people to follow the guidelines then, just as it does now? Did you know that pressure from community members caused many localities to reopen too soon, bringing about a second more deadly wave in October to December of that year?

Here's where we might be *“condemned”* to repeat it.

As of last week, the United States had experienced 252,838 COVID-related deaths since the first reported case in January. In the United States—across two years, 1918-1919—it's estimated that 675,000 died from influenza and pneumonia, with October to December 1918 being the deadliest three months. Researchers noted that in Virginia alone, 95% of all flu deaths occurred in those three months.

In Greene County, there were 28 deaths attributed to the Spanish flu and comparing that to the population that's about 0.5% who passed away. That would be equivalent to 95 people dying from COVID-19 in Greene County using today's population estimates. Thankfully, we've had only four deaths so far, but if the alarming upward trend of serious cases continues into the winter months, this could well be our grim reality if we don't make a change, and soon.

Can you imagine residents in Greene not willing to give their all if 95 locals died during a flood, an earthquake, a tornado or other natural disaster? That's not the way we respond when our neighbors are in need and it's the willingness to help each other that has always made Greene County such a special place to live.

The majority of the recently diagnosed cases in Greene County came within the 7- to 14-day window after Halloween, another holiday where people tend to gather.

The holidays are not canceled, but you are being asked to celebrate them differently than in the recent past. It seems that people may not have listened to the recommendations on Halloween, but you have time to prepare for how best to celebrate winter holidays safely and there are many ways to do it and still be together.

We'll be as grateful as everyone else when this time is behind us, but as much as we want to say the pandemic is over, we know that our wanting it be so does not make it so.

To see the full article about the similarities between the 1918 epidemic and COVID-19, <https://bit.ly/36SwMM6>.

Please, be safe.