

## **Be committed, involved in area's future this year**

| January 09, 2020

Embarking on a new year seems to give many of us incentive to make changes.

Resolutions, however short-lived, are goals backed by good intentions, and the human urge to improve something about our lives.

Against that backdrop, we point out a few topics that affect us here in the Highlands — issues that require our resolve to either fix, abandon, or modify. In no particular order, we think those should include:

- The proposal to expand the Evers Military Operations Area easily tops this list. It affects hundreds of thousands of people in numerous counties and two states. Lowering the altitude to which fighter jets can fly in training and increasing the number of daily flights, not to mention the addition of in-flight refueling, carries risks we cannot yet understand. Why? Because we can't get the information, at least not yet.

If our military, and in this case National Guard pilots, need more training, they should get it. But we should understand the consequences if that training is to occur more often over our heads, and so far, the information on how it affects us has been hard to come by.

While it was good to see a letter surface this week offering to send a guard representative to meet with the Highland County chamber, we think it curious that no other county entity, including supervisors or the economic development authority, was extended that invitation. What's worse, no such invitation seems to have surfaced in Bath County at all. The lack of communication is alarming.

Here's one example: Recorder editor John Bruce sent a Freedom of Information Act request to National Guard headquarters last summer — in July. That request was not even acknowledged until Nov. 26 — five months later. The acknowledgement said, "Your request is in the complex queue for processing and is currently at position No. 300 in our queue with a preliminary completion date of Oct. 31, 2022. We make every effort to provide a final response as soon as possible while processing requests on a first-in/first-out basis."

OK, but 2022? Seriously? Based on our back-of-napkin math, that means it takes the National Guard 35 months to "process" 300 requests, or roughly eight requests a month. Ah-em. Give us a break.

The environmental assessment is already under way. If that is completed and public comment period opens in what we assume will be long before 2022, how are you, the citizens, going to have all the information you need to decide how this affects you?

This proposal requires your careful consideration and involvement. Pay attention to how this all shakes out, and we'll keep pushing to provide more details.

- Economic development is top priority in Bath and Highland. It has been for years, and it's more critical than ever as we watch a steady decline in population make it increasingly hard to stay in business here. Residents should pay close attention to how these two counties support our business climate, or don't. Our pressing needs include affordable housing, financial diversity, and support for creative entrepreneurs and small businesses — both existing and new. County leaders should continue to support all the efforts on small and large scales to attract visitors and new residents. And yes, those priorities must include tourism-based marketing, and keeping infrastructure in place for those who live and work here.

Get the visitor and community center off the ground in Mitchelltown, at least in some form. Get the kiosk established at the top of Shenandoah Mountain for those traveling into Highland. Provide enough incentive for lodging establishments to keep their rooms filled. Keep the schools and medical facilities supported in order to give families and retirees both a reason to live here. Keep moving forward on broadband and cell tower projects that make it easier for folks to work here. Look for opportunities to support the local food movement and create niche products for farmers to add value to what they grow. If we're going to get our population moving in the right direction, all these plates must be kept spinning with that long-term goal in mind.

- Speaking of which, historic preservation has value, and it, too, must be supported. Projects under way to save some of our most important landmarks (and tourist attractions) should continue to get support, and assistance in planning. We have a rich history in these mountain communities, but it's so old now that it's become increasingly expensive to preserve. The Homestead, the Highland Inn, the Warm Springs Pools, the McCoy home — these structures will continue to require money and effort. We have momentum, fund-raising efforts, and the will to see these projects through. Let's make sure we finish what we've started.

- We cannot ignore, either, the fate of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. That, too, affects our land, water quality, and historic areas. As long predicted, much is left up to court decisions now. Keep an eye on the upcoming Supreme Court case, among other legal challenges to come. We were delighted to see yet another permit get smacked down this week for lack of good research and information. ACP's owner Dominion, thanks to all those calling attention to its underhanded, vacuous dealings, is finally getting the pushback it deserves. But this is no time for residents to sit on their laurels. The strong opposition must be sustained, and we must continue to fight for those most directly affected by the project.

What we know is this: Bath and Highland residents have a long history of being actively engaged in their own governance. They have a sense of personal responsibility, and a strong sense of community involvement. We all care about our neighbors, our paychecks, our children, and our quality of life here.

Despite disagreements over where to spend our limited energy and resources, there is less divisiveness here than what we observe on a broader national level.

We think that's because we're still in the game for one another. Our mountain communities understand that we rely on one another to survive, economically and otherwise.

So this year, let's resolve to stick together. Don't let our differences keep us from tackling the tough challenges ahead. We've got work to do.

## **Prepare, be diligent, be patient, be kind**

| March 19, 2020

This is my least favorite edition of The Recorder in 30 years.

There is very little good news at all. Some, but not nearly as much as we prefer to publish. We found good news hard to come by since last week's issue.

Annually, we love filling two March newspapers with happy kids eating pancakes, volunteers smiling at visitors to our Maple Festival and making doughnuts or chicken or

trout, sugar producers proudly showing off how they create maple syrup, that golden elixir that is a staple in our area.

Instead, we bring you mostly bad news — depressing decisions, scary possibilities, medical details, closings that mount by the hour. But, most importantly, the factual information you need about a situation none of us has ever experienced.

It's likely much you read right now will change by the time you finish reading this week's paper.

But folks, it's time to be responsible, practical, and clear-headed.

The spread of this new coronavirus is not a hoax, a conspiracy, or a joke. The point of all these closures and limits is to keep it from killing more people than it could.

Bath and Highland have a high percentage of the most vulnerable among us — older people with existing medical conditions who cannot fight it easily. We are all susceptible; no one is immune; there is no vaccine. But our seniors — our parents and grandparents and friends — are at a much higher risk of death. So are at least a couple of dozen younger people you know, in their 20s, who are already struggling with health challenges or taking medications that lower their immune systems. So are children you know with asthma or other issues. All of them are at very great risk.

Protecting these folks means following the guidelines our scientists, medical professionals, and government officials put in place. No one likes what we're being asked to do, but those who deliberately ignore this threat are a danger to us all.

Younger adults, teens, and children may come down with flu-like symptoms they can easily fight off with cold medicine and rest. Some might carry the virus around without ever feeling sick, like Typhoid Mary. (Google her, kids, while you're studying online these days). Others could carry it around for a couple of weeks, spreading it to others well before they come down with symptoms.

The more seriously we take it, the less power it has to kill. This is the point of following the recommendations to stay home, keep your distance, and wash your hands.

We are fortunate to live in the 21st century. We don't know everything about this particular virus, but we do know how it spreads, and how to prevent that. Our professionals know how to test for it, and how to work toward a vaccine that will protect us in the future.

Despite so much uncertainty, here's what I know: Bath and Highland residents know how to support one another. You know what to do.

Find any effort to lift us up, and pitch in. There are plenty of ways you can do that from the comfort of your living room.

Call a neighbor to catch up, share a laugh, or pray together. Write to loved ones in the nursing home. Offer to help pick up groceries or other supplies for those who are shut in. Order our great maple syrup online from the producers who lost a year of their livelihoods this month. Get take-out from the restaurants that have been forced to close. Help teachers trying to keep their young charges on top of their studies. Give a kind word of thanks to those who must work — our EMS volunteers, medical providers, retail and utility workers, and county leaders under duress.

If you have a few dollars to spare, donate to an emergency service group, a civic organization, a church, a food bank, Highland Medical Center, Bath Community Hospital, or one of the Ruritan clubs that lost thousands of dollars without the Maple Festival. Make sure your friends and neighbors who lose work know how to get

assistance when the state and federal support systems get in place for that. Help them pay some bills, if you can.

And by all means, reach out. If there is something you need, this community will provide. I have seen our Bath and Highland residents suffer greatly before, and while we may have to slow down for a while, I have faith we'll get through this, too.

These will be surreal days, probably months, ahead. But we can and will adjust, and we must, for the sake of our friends, families, and neighbors. Let's find a way to get beyond the initial shock of it all, settle into our new routine, whatever it will be, and do what we do best — take care of one another.

We are built for exactly the kind of self-sufficiency we need right now. We already possess it. Let's harness that well and forge ahead. We've got this.

## **Ordinary citizens become extraordinary**

| July 09, 2020

And just like that, we are done with Dominion.

After more than six years of debating the merits of the corporation's highly controversial plans for a 600-mile, \$8 billion gas transmission line, the project died a fitting death on Sunday afternoon.

Just like that, hundreds of people in three states and beyond could reclaim the thousands of hours they'd been investing almost daily in opposing and protesting the plan.

Just like that, landowners could look out over their beloved properties and breathe, knowing the threat was gone. Their mountain ridges would exist unmolested. Their water supplies would not be tainted. Their peaceful enjoyment of daily life was no longer threatened by the sound of heavy machinery that would have clotted our roads on their way to permanently scarring the landscape. And the thousands of dollars they'd been investing to protect themselves and the environment could now be spent in more meaningful ways.

The 1,000-pound weight on the shoulders of ordinary citizens was lifted, just like that. The collective sense of relief is palpable.

But look again: We now know, if we didn't already, that these were no ordinary citizens. No indeed. People who had never before been called to action rose up and found extraordinary tenacity and determination in the face of exceedingly long odds. They applied sustained, heavy pressure over the course of years, wherever and however they could.

Housewives became adept at navigating a federal docket. Teachers taught themselves how to read the endlessly dry jargon of engineering plans and environmental theses. Musicians became leaders of protests. Retirees put aside their travel plans, turned their kitchen tables into research libraries, and became investigators and reporters. Loggers and farmers became tour guides, showing others where the delicate balance of wetlands or ancient trees were located. Spelunkers shined their bright lights on the risk to karst topography beneath our feet and taught geology. Professors and scientists who had long given up their careers donated countless hours of their expertise. Business owners, from lodging proprietors to real estate agents, became intimately familiar with the vocabulary of state and federal regulations, laws, and the politics behind them.

They doggedly took Dominion to task. They drove to Richmond, or Washington, to attend hearings or stand in protest outside the General Assembly and the now-leveled company headquarters. They wrote letters; they sat in trees; they hosted meetings; they wrote songs and made documentaries; they made phone calls and signs and websites. They put thousands of their own dollars behind the organizations that joined forces for legal battles and research. They pushed their elected leaders. They demanded details. They demanded fairness. They demanded information, justification, and truth.

*And they never gave up.*

Make no mistake: Convincing federal and state regulators that a pipeline running through the last best place on Earth was a losing proposition from the get-go.

Dominion Energy had a strong hold on the Old Dominion, curated over years of putting its millions into lobbying efforts to create laws in its favor.

That tide has turned, and we hope no corporate entity is ever again allowed to wield that much power — to take people's land, dodge responsibility, or be that reckless with the environment, and people's lives.

The controversy surrounding the ACP has educated each of us about how we're governed. Now more than ever, we know how much our votes count, and how critical it is to pay attention to the laws and policies that regulate everything from waterways to public input, from the power of money to the power of our legal systems.

The vast volumes of information generated about this project and the places it affected should exist in single repository somewhere easily accessed, not just on the case docket at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for this project. It will be a valuable resource to generations in the future who may again need the knowledge acquired here when they must evaluate other proposals that threaten homes, forests, and rivers.

Residents and landowners in Bath and Highland have successfully fought off these kinds of ugly self-serving developments before, and they will again. They will also return their focus to lifting our economies without damaging our precious quality of life.

But for now, they will breathe.