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Amherst residents sound off on COVID-19 restrictions

Justin Faulconer

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Photo by Justin Faulconer/The New Era-Progress

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Virginia's restrictions aimed at protecting against the spread of the coronavirus drew a steady flow of differing views among Amherst County residents during the board of supervisors' Jan. 19 meeting.

Some who spoke during a public comments session described Gov. Ralph Northam's mandates as "tyrannical," abuse of power, overreach and an unconstitutional breach of First Amendment rights while others said they are life-saving measures necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The public's comments, which exceeded an hour and consisted of more than dozen speakers, including several delivered electronically and read aloud, centered on a draft resolution supervisors considered to call upon the General Assembly to reduce, place limits on or control the governor's emergency powers. Rather than approve a resolution, the board unanimously voted to direct County Administrator Dean Rodgers to write the state legislature on supervisors' behalf and ask that it create limits, as well as checks and balances, on Northam's authority.

"You must let the General Assembly know how you feel," Chair Jennifer Moore told residents. "The General Assembly needs to assess the power given to the governor."

Supervisor Jimmy Ayers said state legislators must step up to the plate in the process to hand down "definitive guidelines on what we should or shouldn't do."

"Our governor is doing the best he can. He's one man with one set of ideas," Supervisor Claudia Tucker said. "We're in uncharted territory... and we need some solutions."

A few supervisors said they do not support a measure to make the county a First Amendment sanctuary, as Campbell County officials recently did and some Amherst residents asked, explaining the county can't declare state orders invalid and unworthy of enforcement. Tucker said she told Republicans and Democrats alike hers was a "hard no" on such an action.

The board said instead they favor sending a message that the General Assembly should have more of a say in matters affecting so many residents and businesses. "If nothing else, give [Northam] an affirmation. Help him out a little bit," Supervisor Tom Martin said, adding: "In the end I believe all of us want the same thing, and that's to put this pandemic behind us."

Eric Orasi, a county resident, said he and many who came out to protest are against preventing the right to peacefully assemble in gatherings of more than 10 people.

“We do have a right to go to church. We have a right to have people over for Sunday dinner,” Orasi said. “They’re trying to silence us, all of us. Don’t take away my right to peacefully assemble and be with my family.”

Madison Heights resident James Weeks said he wears a mask but doesn’t think it is effective in stopping the virus’s spread and is a gesture that goes along with giving up personal freedoms.

“If it doesn’t work why are we fighting so hard to keep something that doesn’t work?” Weeks said, adding: “The only I needle I see is that our freedoms are slipping away... we can’t give up on our freedoms.”

Weeks said those fighting for personal liberties are not racists or fear-mongers. “That’s not us; that’s nobody here,” he said.

Amherst resident Janice Augustine, who recovered from the virus, said sacrifices are necessary for the greater good. “This is not us losing our freedoms,” Augustine said of following the state’s orders. “This is helping our neighbors to be safe.”

John Harper, a county resident, said Northam shouldn’t be allowed to make “unjust rules” as he deems necessary and feels he has gone too far.

“I’m like a lot of people in the county. I want to be left alone and live my life,” Harper said. “...The governor has gone too far. This is uncalled for. No government official has the right to limit gatherings in my own home. The First Amendment right to assemble matters to me.”

Vance Wilkins, chair of the Amherst County Republican Committee and former state delegate representing the county, said the governor having too much power and making decisions that are putting people out of business is akin to a “dictator.”

“One person doesn’t know it all,” Wilkins said in lobbying for the push to bring checks on that authority.

Don Glasser, a county resident, stood feet away from the microphone because the person who spoke before him wasn’t wearing a facial covering. “Do I have a right to endanger my neighbors to show just how free I am?” he asked the board.

Some speakers said they feel the matter is about public health and not the First Amendment. Others said their rights should not be diminished during a pandemic.

“Our freedoms do not end when someone else’s fear begins,” Amber Lyssy, of Amherst, said.

Melodie Fletcher, of Madison Heights, said masks and social distancing hasn’t been fully successful in halting COVID-19 because many are not using those measures.

“If I’m dead, my freedom doesn’t matter,” Fletcher said.

She encouraged the board to reach out individually to lawmakers rather than taking a position as an elected body on the matter since she doesn’t believe supervisors speak for a majority of the county on the matter.

Dawn Justice, of Amherst, said restrictions are not limited to COVID-19 and could be about anything in the future.

“We must stand for everyone’s ability to assemble peacefully, express their opinions without fear of repercussions and shop,” Justice said.

Teresa Ray, a county resident, said the state’s infringement on resident’s First Amendment rights has traumatized many and big box stores are not as negatively affected by the restrictions as locally owned businesses are.

“Why are they thriving with no fear of operating while our small businesses are harassed and excessively penalized financially?” Ray said. “... I personally believe that they are conditioning us for future restrictions under the guise of this virus.”

Gary Anderson, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Lowesville, said he has left social distancing and mask-wearing decisions up to churchgoers out of respect for their personal freedoms.

Amherst resident Tony Robertson noted the virus' strong surge over the past month. The county's positive case number as of Jan. 26 was 2,284 with 56 hospitalizations and 10 deaths related to the virus, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

"If you pass this resolution you are inviting this virus into our community," Robertson said to supervisors.

Gloria Witt, president of the Amherst NAACP branch, said she believes the governor's orders and what they actually say have been misinterpreted by many.

"You cannot compare [an] emergency power tornado situation to a pandemic. I wish we could put it in the bag in 90 days," Witt said.

Supervisor David Pugh said he's changed some of his habits, such as not getting haircuts or eating out, because of the virus. He supports mask wearing and abiding by the measures but also feels residents have the right to assemble.

"We need to stop all the hate you see everywhere," Pugh said, referring to the national mood. "... I just hope we can come together because things are headed in the wrong direction and we need to change."

Watch Now: Cline returns to holding in-person town halls

Justin Faulconer

Dec 13, 2021



U.S. Rep. Ben Cline, R-6th, speaks to Amherst County residents Monday in Monroe during the first town hall the congressman has held since the coronavirus pandemic, for the News & Advance

Seeing dozens of Amherst County residents' faces brought a smile to the face of U.S. Rep. Ben Cline, the congressman said early Monday as he resumed in-person town halls for the first time since early 2020.

Speaking to Amherst residents and later in the day to voters in Buena Vista and Highland County, Cline said officials are working to learn more about the omicron variant of the coronavirus, and he stated his opposition to a federal vaccine mandate.

“We’re working to make sure we beat this thing and we ensure anyone who wants a vaccine can get one,” Cline said. “I firmly believe the Constitution does not include the ability for the federal government to mandate that you be vaccinated for it.”

He said the Biden administration’s push for a federal vaccine mandate is “not only not constitutional but wrongheaded from a recovery standpoint, both economic and health care-related,” and would negatively affect businesses of 100 employees or more if it moves forward.

“If we are truly to get our economy back on track right now, as I talk to businesses around Amherst... and other places around the district, one of the first things they want to talk about is the effect of this mandate on their employees,” Cline said.

Some employees are not getting vaccinated and are making decisions on what’s right for them and their families, Cline said.

“Their personal lives are being forced into upheaval as this gets closer,” he said of the federal mandate for large employers. “We need certainty so that our economy can recover faster and folks can get back to work and be secure in that work.”

Cline also spoke about frustrations with lack of bipartisanship in Washington, citing a recent infrastructure bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which he opposed, as an example. He criticized the House’s Democratic leadership for how that legislation, the basis of which he said should be bipartisan in discussing infrastructure needs, was handled. He also spoke against the Build Back Better Bill, a \$1.9 trillion spending legislation package making its way through Congress.

“I don’t think it’s building back or better,” Cline said. “In fact, I think it’s contributing to America going broke. I call it ‘build back broke.’”

Cine said he feels some Democratic lawmakers want to work in a bipartisan effort but are sidelined by House leaders “in the name of bigger government and higher taxes.” He emphasized his opposition to the federal government’s “wasteful, runaway” spending.

“A lot of the ways in which this leadership and this administration are trying to pursue some policy goals that most of Amherst County tells me they are not in favor of is through the spending process and the power of the purse,” said Cline, a member of the judiciary committee. “As they seek to mandate things like taxpayer-funded abortions, with your tax dollars, I realized that is happening through the appropriations process, not through the judiciary committee. I have dug in on the judiciary committee and worked to make sure that your tax dollars are spent wisely and we finally start to tackle this deficit spending that is threatening future generations of our kids and grandkids.”

With the national debt approaching \$31 trillion, Cline said, Congress can’t sustain such a level of federal spending with inflation at the highest it’s been in nearly 40 years.

A few in the Amherst crowd of about 30 people addressed immigration and complained about those coming into the country illegally.

“It’s no longer immigration; it’s really an invasion,” said Ed Oliveras, of Monroe. “And it’s supported by the Democrats because they figured these people are going to be Democratic voters.”

Cline said he has visited the U.S.-Mexico border and communities near it are overwhelmed with drugs and a demand on their resources.

“In many ways we don’t have a functioning border,” Cline said. “This administration is facilitating this crisis by ignoring it.”

He said in describing the tracking process that a majority of illegal aliens are no-shows for required court hearings and vanish. The federal government should ensure those who do are not eligible for benefits taxpayers receive.

“People are not going to wait in line in the legal system if they think they can get just as much out of the system by coming across illegally,” Cline said.

Cline also pointed to Republican Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin receiving 50% of the Hispanic vote, which drew applause from the Amherst crowd.

Madison Heights resident Gloria Witt spoke favorably of the Build Back Better bill, which she described as an effort to transform the nation’s social safety system.

“These are unique times and it requires unique leadership,” Witt said. “No one could have predicted the pandemic.”

She said suffering families need living wages that businesses aren’t keeping pace with in many cases. “We need to help working families just as much as we need businesses,” Witt said.

Cline said the legislation would raise taxes and if provisions are made permanent would add \$3 trillion to the debt. He said Congress needs to exercise restraint and he is concerned about aspects of the bill, adding increases taxes on businesses while cutting taxes for the wealthy is “a poor recipe for solutions in our country.”

Cline also voted against the American Rescue Plan Act, a stimulus package President Joe Biden signed into law in March. It generated more than \$13 million combined between Amherst County and Town of Amherst government and Amherst County Public Schools; \$5.3 million of that is planned to go toward a major renovation and expansion project at Amherst County High School.

Cline said while he supports assisting businesses and families affected by COVID-19, his opposition was because a majority of the money went to bail out deficits in Democratic-leaning states such as New York and California.

An Amherst resident asked Cline what he is doing to help “political prisoners” from the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Cline said he defends the right of every American to speedy trial and due process of law.

“Your concerns are being heard and appropriate questions are being asked,” Cline said.

Monroe resident and business owner Barbara Register addressed the high increase in costs of construction materials and asked Cline about relief for business owners.

“The price of everything is staying up,” Register said. “It’s not going back to where it was pre-COVID.”

Vance Wilkins, chair of the Amherst County Republican Committee, criticized companies such as Google and Facebook. The committee tried to buy an ad for a candidate on Facebook and was informed by the company it couldn’t because that person was banned from the platform, according to Wilkins. He didn’t name the candidate.

“That is suppression,” Wilkins said, a point which Cline agreed with. “They shouldn’t have that power. We have lost the ability to have freedom of discussion in this country. They are clobbering the First Amendment and choking it to death.”

Cline is seeking a third term this November. Democrat Jennifer Lewis, of Waynesboro, recently announced she is running. A Republican victory in the midterms is crucial, Cline said.

“It is going to dictate the direction of this country, whether the Biden administration continues to drive us unchecked toward excessive spending, failure to have any accountability for the disaster in Afghanistan, addressing inflation,” he said. “All of these things can be addressed by a Republican majority in the House and the Senate to push back against the president.”

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/board-shoots-down-plans-to-harvest-timber-on-two-county-owned-sites/article_eb1bd8fc-32ad-11ec-9c6b-cb9e38491d2c.html

Board shoots down plans to harvest timber on two county-owned sites

Justin Faulconer

Oct 27, 2021



A view of Amherst County's new transfer station undergoing construction at the county landfill on Kentmoor Farm Road. The 8,000-square-foot facility will include a dumping floor that brings in trash, which the county will send off in trucks to a landfill in another locality.

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Timber will not be harvested on Amherst County-owned properties for financial gain the Amherst County Board of Supervisors unanimously has decided.

The board voted during its Oct. 19 meeting to cease implementation of forestry stewardship plans for the county's wooded tracts of property, specifically two sites of a former Windy Ridge landfill and the currently used landfill on Kentmoor Farm Road.

The Virginia Department of Forestry's forest management plan examined about 353 acres of forestland in the county, according to county documents.

The 208-acre landfill parcel on Kentmoor Farm Road consists mostly of mature hardwoods and presents an opportunity to thin the hardwood timber and improve the quality and growth rate of the oak and poplar trees, according to documents.

The 88-acre tract at the former landfill site in eastern Amherst County has a mixture of planted loblolly pine trees, Virginia pine and mature hardwoods on land bordered by the Buffalo River.

The majority of trees on both parcels are more than a half-century old, the plan states.

Bill Perry, a state forester for the Amherst area who developed the stewardship plans, addressed the board Oct. 19.

"We're looking at taking an inventory of the forest and resources there," Perry said of managing timber for income. "It is a resource. There are parts of it we can improve on."

He said he doesn't benefit from the sale of timber and is bringing recommendations with the decision being the county's to make as a landowner.

"I don't have a dog in the fight," Perry said. "I'm in an impartial person in this."

Supervisor Tom Martin said he has much respect for the logging industry and forestry department and in the case of public property the decision is “very personal” in weighing various factors, including the environmental effects.

He said the county’s comprehensive plan for future growth and development prioritizes protection of the environment and the county owns 1,635 acres, or .53% of the county’s overall land total, according to the county geographic information system.

He said 0.53% of county-owned land is “entrusted to [the board] to make sure the very best for the environment is done.”

“Our forest can be seen as a crop,” Martin said of profiting off timber sales. “But I think they should also be looked at a resource for our environment, for our future generations, our watersheds, all of those things.”

Martin said making a conscious decision to convert forestland into a cash crop will create a higher fire hazard risk by lowering the trees’ canopy and he also is concerned with spraying herbicide chemicals in wooded areas near rivers and creeks.

“I don’t think I want to take that chance on that large of an area,” Martin said.

Martin also referenced concerns raised by a Kentmoor Farm Road resident who addressed the board earlier during public comments at the Oct. 9 meeting. The resident opposed tree cutting at the landfill site, explaining wildlife would be driven into neighboring landowners’ properties and residents put up with a lot of traffic and other issues living close to the landfill and don’t need another “stressful situation.”

Martin said the tree cutting would not serve to protect the environment and the residents who live on Kentmoor Farm Road will be affected when more truck traffic results from a transfer station under construction, a facility that collects waste and hauls it for burial elsewhere.

He said he also was concerned wooded areas of the county's parks and industrial park were considered for harvesting, though no recommendations came forward.

"I just don't think we're being responsible landowners," Martin said if the county were to proceed.

Martin's motion also said county staff is not to enter into any other discussion about the topic unless directed by the board.

"I don't believe the board ever directed county staff to do this," Martin said of the plans coming forward. "My point of view, let's take a chance ... and let God do what He's going to do with the land."

Board member Jimmy Ayers said residents in the Kentmoor Farm Road area need to be taken care of.

"The citizens of that community have dealt with a lot through the years," Ayers said.