

# DINING WITH THE DEVIL?

## Restaurant owner: 'Pittsylvania County is charging people just to survive'

By **ELIAS WEISS**

*Star-Tribune News Editor*

After a 5-2 vote on Tuesday, July 20, Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors raised the county's food and beverage tax rate from 4 percent to 6 percent. It didn't take long for one prominent Pittsylvania County restaurant owner to speak out in fierce opposition.

"This is not a luxury tax, this is a tax on everyday life," John Hoffman, owner of Mama Possum's Drive-In on Route 41 in Mt. Hermon, told the *Star-Tribune*. "To raise this tax on food by 50 percent is such an ugly, ugly way to do it."

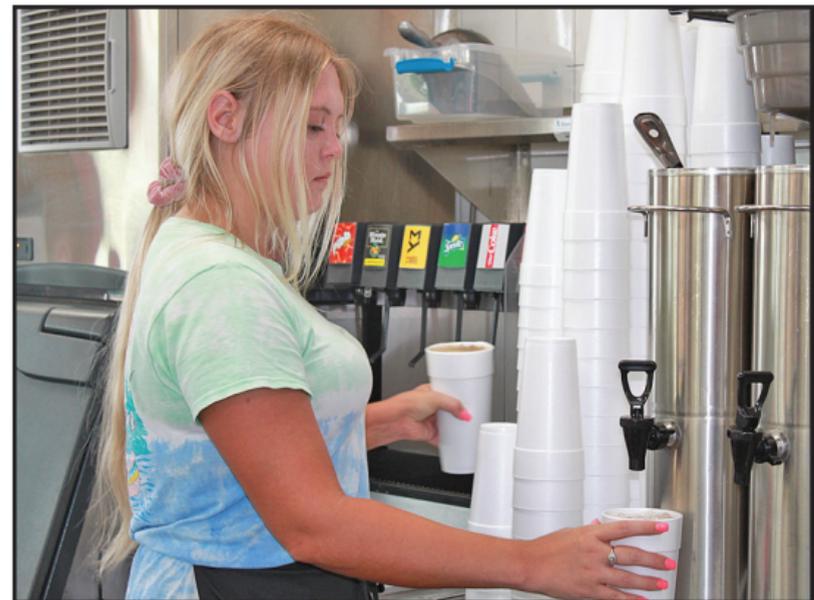
Supervisor Vic Ingram (Tunstall) is one of two

supervisors, along with Ben Farmer (Callands-Gretna), who voted "no."

"I had no peace about voting for, in essence, a 50 percent increase in the meals tax," Ingram told the newspaper. "With the state of affairs as they are currently, I think people are paying enough in taxes."

For both Hoffman and Ingram, the question of increasing the food and beverage tax by half boiled down to the memories so many in Pittsylvania County share – growing up in a lower- or middle-class blue collar family, just struggling to get by.

"I remember when there was no sales tax of any kind," said Hoffman, who was born in 1953



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune

**Mama Possum's employee Tiffany Dove prepares drinks at the Route 41 drive-in.**

**See MEALS TAX page 10A**

# Meals Tax

Continued from page 1A

and raised in Southern Virginia. "My first experience with taxation in Virginia was when sales tax first came into play in the early 1960s. I went into the grocery store with my mother and heard her complain that she had to pay tax to feed her children. For many decades, the food that mothers provided for their children was taxed. That was unconscionable to other states."

Ingram grew up with five brothers and sisters. In his family, eating out was a rare and special occasion.

"While we weren't poor, it was quite a struggle for my daddy to provide for us," he said. "I remember my mama cooking basic meals and then standing off to one side while making sure that we were all fed. She would often comment that she wasn't hungry. It was many years later that I came to understand that she gave up many meals just to make sure that her children didn't go hungry."

Today, however, both men agree eating out is no longer a privilege.

"Eating out is not a luxury anymore," Hoffman said. "Pittsylvania County is charging people just to survive."

Hoffman and Ingram mentioned working mothers and senior citizens, two dominant demographics in Pittsylvania County, as those disproportionately affected by the county's decision.

"It hurts me that there are people that can't enjoy a meal with their family, or a senior citizen may not be able to have breakfast and socialize with friends," Ingram said. "With them, much of what they enjoy is limited because they are a senior citizen. Many will go to a local restaurant and have coffee and breakfast with friends, and that's the only social involvement they have. I thought about them when I voted."

Hoffman, too, pointed to senior citizens a significant tranche of his clientele.

"Some senior citizens come in and eat all their meals here," Hoffman said. "They go to Reuben's for breakfast and have dinner with me. Maybe they are in a wheelchair or use a walker and it's too much to go to the store, buy groceries, go home and cook it just to sit there and eat it alone. It's cheaper to have a simple meal at a place like Reuben's or Villages or Mama Possum's, and those people are carrying the tax burden."

Pointing to the all-male board of supervisors, Hoffman said he took the most offense to what he perceived as the board's negligence to the needs of working mothers.

"A typical customer that comes through my Mt. Hermon business: a mom who may or may not have a husband, feeding two kids," he said. "She's getting food to take home because she worked all day. She doesn't have time to go home and fix meals and the kids are yelling for food."

According to Hoffman, the average tax per person under the new tax rate for a meal at his restaurant will be \$1.70 per person, up from \$1.13. Of that, 85 cents goes to Pittsylvania County.

"For the privilege of eating dinner, she's paying over \$5 to Virginia and the County of Pittsylvania. She's paying \$5 just to live," Hoffman said. "They might want to eat twice a day. That's \$10 every day that mom has to make, seven days a week, to give the great Commonwealth of Virginia and Pittsylvania County. This mom, she's just trying to feed herself and two kids, God forbid if she had a third one or a husband, and she's paying an extra \$3,500 a year."

Ingram said that, by raising the meals tax, Pittsylvania County is depriving its citizens of pleasure when it should be seeking ways to give its citizens pleasure.

"I thought the 4 percent meals tax was

reasonable. But to go up 50 percent, it's unconscionable," Ingram said. "There are some people that really struggle to take their family out for a meal. The owners themselves, they are struggling to keep their business afloat and to keep employees, so with that increased tax rate, I worry what it would do to local businesses, the workers and especially the waitresses if the tips will not be what they used to be because of that - I suspect so. In essence, we all suffer."

Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bob Warren, in his comments supporting the tax hike, mentioned that out-of-towners passing through Pittsylvania County would pay the tax if they stop and eat. That could alleviate some of the tax burden from county landowners, he said.

"Let's talk about taxing people that are 'passing through' our county as Mr. Warren stated," said Hoffman, who has a summer home and co-owns a business in Montana. "In Montana, talk about traveling through - we have one of the longest stretches of interstate in the world - I-90 and I-94. Without stopping, it takes 10 hours driving 80 miles per hour to get across Montana. A lot of people cross the state going to Seattle or the West Coast. You want to know how much Montana taxes the food people buy to feed their kids? It's zero."

Hoffman said that, after he started spending time in Montana, one of the hardest things to get used to was ordering a burger for \$9.99 and actually receiving a penny back.

"Mr. Warren implied that this was an opportunity to get more money out of people because so many people are passing through - people are passing through that don't come back," he said. "In Montana, they don't charge me more tax, like Mr. Warren said, as I'm 'passing through.' People come here to buy big-ticket things - recreational vehicles and \$500,000 motor homes, and that creates wealth in this state. You don't create wealth in the county by making it difficult to live there."

Ingram agreed that, by raising the meals tax, it is now harder to live in Pittsylvania County.

"When I was confronted with the vote of increasing the meals tax by 50 percent, I reflected back on growing up and how difficult it was at times to go out to eat," Ingram said. "I knew that by increasing the tax rate it would make it more difficult for many. If we don't have a tax base to cover operant expense, we [as government] have to cut back. We have to stop putting this burden on the citizens."

Hoffman adopts the position that, soon, people will flee Pittsylvania County for tax-free havens like Montana, Florida and Delaware.

"The idea to build up your economy by taking advantage of people is the wrong idea," he said. "I understand the Pittsylvania County government needs more money, but to gouge people who are eating by raising their tax 50 percent - I think these guys running government in Pittsylvania County think it is a luxury. It isn't a luxury anymore; it's what people do. There is no housewife cooking all day anymore, that is not how the world works. They are the ones making sure kids are fed and they are the ones getting stuck with the bill."

Ingram noted that, on November's ballot, Pittsylvania County residents will face yet another tax increase - the 1 percent school infrastructure tax. Ingram supports this tax, but said motives behind the two taxes could not be more incongruent.

"That's a good thing - a 1 percent tax that was authorized by the general assembly is something I support because that is

across-the-board. Everybody gets to pay that," Ingram said. "It's ripple effect when you punish people with taxes. They stop spending, so collectively that hurts everyone. I'm not a financial genius - I have to listen and rely on what the others say, but from my heart, it is simple: if the government doesn't have the money to buy something, then don't buy it and live within your means. Nobody likes to pay it, but reasonable people know taxes provide services. As supervisors, we are required to be empowered and to be mindful of how much money we take away from the citizens. I try to vote what's best for the people."

Hoffman, who has been in the Danville area since 1978, said he anticipates paying Pittsylvania County an additional \$25,000 per year based on his previous taxes.

"I think it's unconscionable that they can tax food like this," Hoffman said. "Mama Possum's restaurant last year paid about \$50,000 to the County of Pittsylvania from what we collected from our patrons. Overnight we now have to collect \$75,000 per year from our patrons to give to the Pittsylvania County people. That's on top of the other \$50,000 we already give to the state. We are just a mom and pop hot dog stand - we have 15 to 17 employees at a time. We employ local people and the profits... stay here in Pittsylvania County. That's over \$135,000 a year in tax for the State of Virginia and the County of Pittsylvania for the privilege of people eating lunch. It is really sad that they don't understand this."

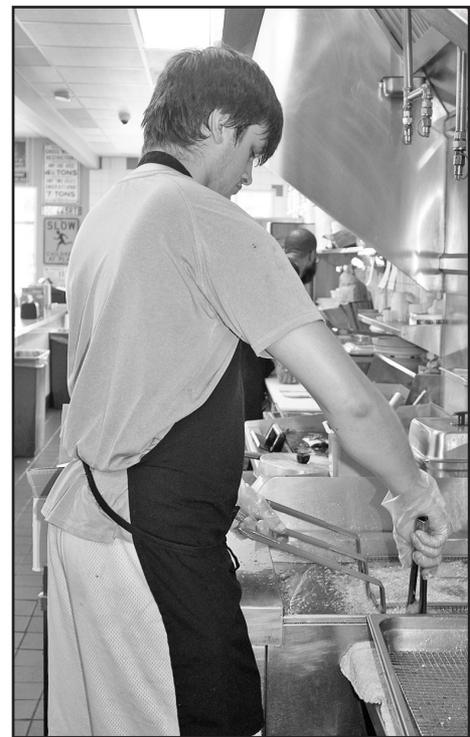
Hoffman wonders how he could be held responsible for such a significant portion of what the county last week said would bring in an additional \$400,000 total per annum.

"\$400,000? How is it that little? I'm paying one-sixteenth of the county's entire additional tax? Are you kidding me?" Hoffman asked. "When the government finds out it can tax something, they go for it. This government is a greedy beast that only feeds itself. Then the beast starves when everyone feeding it goes to Florida or Montana."

Warren argued that Pittsylvania County residents were at ease spending 6 percent on meals in other localities like Danville and Halifax County, but Hoffman had a rebuttal for that, as well.

"One of the most absurd things I heard stated at the meeting was that it would bring the tax to the same as Danville. Now, 100 percent of people can eat in Danville because it won't make any difference," he said. "A lot of people eat out twice a day. It's just how modern human life is, especially with seniors and on-the-go young families. They're being taxed because the fathers on that all-male board are not representing working moms. Now there's no reason not to go eat in Danville."

In Butte, Montana, where Hoffman co-owns a business, the town built a theme-park caliber waterpark for the city's children. For \$4, the children enjoy the park - and it was built with tax dollars, none



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune

**Mama Possum's employee Dawson Anderson fries onion rings at the Route 41 drive-in.**

of which came from sales or meals taxes. Butte and Danville both have a population of around 40,000.

"What do we do in Mt. Hermon? They spend \$500,000 on a rental property to build a library," he said. "I never see any cars over there. If they want to tax people, give the people something that makes them happy. This is not how you make anyone want to live in a community."

Hoffman's cousin moved from New Jersey to Danville to flee abrasive taxes, and Hoffman says Virginia is slowly but surely becoming absorbed into the "big sponge of Northeastern taxation policies."

"It's driving people that produce income and that produce economic vitality out of those areas," he said. "The idea that Pittsylvania County has the power to tax, it gives them a lust to demand people turn over money simply because they want to eat."

Ingram has no plans to flee, and said he hopes he and his constituents can make do with the new tax.

"Digging under your car seat or checking your dryer for loose change or having to share a hot dog can produce fond memories, but I'd prefer that no one would ever have to struggle to enjoy a simple meal with their family," Ingram said. "It should be a happy time and a happy meal."

Hoffman said he's only staying in Mt. Hermon because of his hometown loyalty.

"By doing what they're doing, the Pittsylvania County government is driving people away," he concluded. "Apparently, the people that control Pittsylvania County don't have any kind of vision. You need a little vision to be successful in this life. These people just don't understand it."

Your local option for design & printing services!

**WP**

**GRAPHIC  
DESIGN**

for small businesses to major corporations

PRINTING & DESIGN

# ACCUSATIONS PILE UP ON BOTH SIDES OF LANDFILL

*A half century-long battle in southeast Pittsylvania County is warming up*

By **ELIAS WEISS**  
*Star-Tribune News Editor*

RINGGOLD, Va. — Residents of Pittsylvania County's Mountain Hill community are unhappy. They are unhappy with a lot of things: their representation in county government, their perceived subjugation by First Piedmont Corporation and their unanswered pleas to the Department of Environmental Quality. They say the First Piedmont landfill in their backyards has degraded their lives to an unlivable quality—fear, sickness and exasperation dominate their day-to-day. But the landfill has existed in that very location for nearly 50 years, leading officials on the other side to question the timing of the community's latest cry for help.

"Residents of our area have lived with intolerable permeating odor, wind-blown trash and resident vultures for many years," said Mountain Hill resident Adrienne Sheets. "Frequent ongoing appeals to the DEQ, county board of supervisors, First Piedmont management and Ben Davenport himself have been ignored or minimized and rationalized by the responsible parties. No one shows concern or interest in helping to solve our community problems created by the landfill."

Sheets is part of a homegrown special interest group called "Save our Rural Community." Ben Davenport,

the founder and chairman of First Piedmont, called the group members "irrational people," but admitted he still takes the community's concerns very seriously.

"We are aggressively trying to abate this. It's the nature of a landfill—it smells. As it ages, it decays," Davenport said. "Frankly, they should appreciate the fact that a company is so community-minded that it wants to really try to do something about this. I've had educated people make accusations that I felt like were not true. Sometimes, it's just as well not to know the truth. It's convenient."

County Administrator David Smitherman said that he was skeptical of the community's recent outcry after nearly 50 years of living with the landfill.

"I find it very peculiar why this is the topic *de jour* today at this juncture," Smitherman said. "But that's fine. Every time there is a complaint or hint of noncompliance, it is vigorously investigated."

On Monday, June 7, Timothy Chesher began the process of filing candidacy to run to replace incumbent Joe Davis for the Dan River District seat

See **LANDFILL**, page 12A



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune

**Mountain Hill resident Adrienne Sheets shows the proximity of the landfill to a residential backyard on Cedar Road.**

## New candidate seeks to replace Davis on board of supervisors



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune

**First Piedmont personnel work to cover one cell of the Ringgold landfill site early Monday morning.**

# Landfill

Continued from page 1A

on Pittsylvania County's Board of Supervisors. Save our Rural Community members suggested he had all of their votes locked in already.

"Timothy Chesher has, as of about 30 minutes ago, filed petition pages to run [for that office]," said County Registrar Kelly Keese at 1:30 p.m. Monday.

Pittsylvania County, First Piedmont, DEQ, Virginia Department of Health and other pertinent entities met with concerned residents for a community forum in January. Since then, tensions have only continued to increase.

"It quickly spun out of control with all the rumors about what we were supposedly doing," said Nick Setliff, First Piedmont's chief operating officer. "I tried to call some of the residents to say, 'Hey, I'd love to meet with you and explain what we're doing.' Nobody ever called me back. There is a lot of misinformation and false stuff. It's frustrating, because there's no actual ongoing discussion. It's just, 'First Piedmont is lying to us about that.' And that's the end of it."

Mountain Hill is a generally low-income community. Mobile homes dot the vista, mantled by a mountain of covered industrial waste. The majority of local residents are either old enough to remember a day before the landfill moved into town back in 1972, or live on inherited family land that predates the landfill. Residents feel trapped with no way to move away from Mountain Hill.

"We were defeated before we ever said the first word. We never had a choice," said Gerri Lamie, local resident. "These days, I can't get out the door. The smell is so sickening."

Save our Rural Community has backing from the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, a regional, community-based, non-profit environmental organization that says, "There is simply no such thing as a safe landfill."

"No matter how many barriers, liners and pipes we install to try to mitigate the risk, landfills will always leak toxic chemicals into the soil and water," the organization said in a statement. "A community burdened with a megadump is saddled with the liability forever, with little or no control."

One of the community's primary demands is a fence between the landfill and residential properties. A number of residential plots abut the landfill on Cedar Road, as well as the Evangel Assembly of God Church, which has not held an outdoor event since 2018 due to the odor of the landfill. A treeline separates the landfill from residents' backyards, but homeowners are concerned that animals, children and elderly people could make their way too easily into the facility by accident. The special interest group tapped the fence as a primary concern, but neither the county nor First Piedmont had heard word of it until this year.

"We looked back over 50 years to see if there had ever been any occurrence of someone accidentally coming onto the landfill, and we came up with nothing," Setliff said. "We think our resources are better spent other places than putting a fence up that's not a real issue and never has been."

Davenport added, "The fence is really miniscule. Frankly, I just don't get it. I think the group would like to be able to say that they got us to do something because they wanted it done. I get that, and it doesn't bother me. As a businessman, I have tried to invest resources that are important to invest in."

Lamie, whose husband has dementia, said, "It only takes one accident to prove that theory wrong, and then it's too late. It shows how insignificant they think we are."

With a new candidate in Tim Chesher trying to claim the Dan River District slot on the board of supervisors, Mountain Hill residents feel a little more at ease. One of their primary qualms is with their supervisor, Joe Davis.

"Joe Davis treats us like the enemy," said local resident Robin Rosson. "Supervisors are supposed to support the people, not the businesses."

Lamie said, "Our supervisor works for Davenport, not us."

County supervisors do not have regulatory authority over landfills, however, but they do act as a conduit for citizens to get the answers they seek. Despite this, many in Mountain Hill say they feel shut out of the conversation.

"Every time I ask him [Davis] a question, he says, 'I don't know Jerry, let me get back to you,'" said local resident Jerry Martin, who is a member of the Ringgold Fire Department. "He has never gotten back to me. One time I called him, and he went off ballistics on me. My wife heard it all. He said, 'Those women in Mt. Hill are liars. They're stupid. They don't know anything.' I have never been more disrespected in my life than I was then."

The community forum meeting is when many were "really turned off" to Mr. Davis.

"Did he support us in any way? No," said local resident Linda Gauldin, who works in the area as a nurse. "He sat in the corner the whole time and never said a word. No kind of support. They wouldn't talk to us or let us ask any questions. I felt

like it was my fault."

Rosson reflected a similar experience.

"We thought we could at least get some questions answered, but we could not," she said. "It's sad, because all of these houses have been here 70 or more years. They just dumped a landfill right in the middle of this community."

Setliff responded, "They weren't a fan of how the meeting went. It was more educational, and less giving them a platform to voice their concerns. They weren't super into that."

Residents are also upset that Davis "refuses to hear" their concerns on the Save our Rural Community Facebook page.

"We invited Joe to listen to our group," said Julie Owen, Mountain Hill resident. "To this day, he has refused to join. Our own supervisor is unwilling to listen to us. He doesn't want to hear it."

Smitherman said he supports Davis's decision not to join.

"Facebook is probably the worst thing that has happened to local government administration in the last 20 years. I think it is the worst thing to happen to civilized society in my lifetime," Smitherman said. "I think the troubles we have locally, state and nationally all have a common denominator that is social media, which gives voice to the misinformed and provides credibility to false information. I find it a necessary evil to communicate outwardly as a government, but I do not consider Facebook a relevant source of information. I find it exactly what it is, which is a social network, not an educational network."

Smitherman estimated less than 10 percent of the county's 62,000 residents are on Facebook.

"As the county administrator, I'm not going to join these social media groups," he said. "I don't find them to be a productive form of fact-finding and official communication."

Davis said he is empathetic toward the Mountain Hill community and assures the public he has never intended to work against them.

"I have heard and understand the concerns from the Mountain Hill community regarding the First Piedmont landfill and am empathetic to their cause," Davis said. "Regardless, the Board of Supervisors has no regulatory authority to mitigate the matter."

One rumor circulating the Save our Rural Community group is the designation of the First Piedmont landfill in Ringgold. Group members have routinely referred to the landfill as a municipal household trash site, although in reality, it is classified as an industrial waste facility. They complain that the landfill is not capped off and covered daily and that street sweeping does not occur daily, although these measures are not required of an industrial landfill by law. First Piedmont says it is going above and beyond the legal requirements.

One of these auxiliary efforts is a new odor machine. The machine is not required by the DEQ, but was installed by First Piedmont in an effort to ameliorate community relations, Davenport said. The machine, erected in October 2020, uses a catalyst to convert hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) into sulfur and runs eight to ten hours per day. Setliff estimated the sulfur output accounts for at least 80 percent of the unpleasant smell permeating the Mountain Hill neighborhood.

High levels of H<sub>2</sub>S can irreversibly poison the human brain. Low levels of H<sub>2</sub>S can cause headache, nausea, eye irritation and throat irritation. Chronic exposure to low levels of hydrogen sulfide can lead to deficits in balance and reaction time, dizziness, insomnia and overpowering fatigue. Local residents cited fear of the unknown in light of these facts.

"What I'm concerned about is what we are breathing in the air and drinking in the water," said Gauldin. "I haven't drank tap water in ten years. I'm terrified. Nine out of 10 people in Mountain Hill only drink bottled water."

Martin shared the concerns of Gauldin. "It's not only the odor, which is terrible," he said. "I'm worried about my health, my water."

The term "hazardous" is used by the group frequently, although as First Piedmont CEO Tommy Stump pointed out, the closest hazardous waste landfill is in Yukon, Pennsylvania.

"Looking at their 'Save our Rural Community' Facebook page, some of the stuff they come up with—I wonder myself where it came from," Setliff said. "I know the term 'hazardous' is thrown around a lot. Unless it's just someone there that Google searched 'landfills' and saw that some landfills do take municipal solid waste and then put two and two together and said, 'That must be what First Piedmont is doing,' I'm not really sure where that information must have come from."

Another concern neighbors have is the number of fires that have combusted within the landfill. Residents cite general terror and fear of smoke inhalation. According to the Ringgold Fire Department, the landfill at one point saw 17 fires in three years.

"The heat was so intense, it's not telling how many tons of garbage burned into



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune  
"Save our Rural Community" special interest group members from left to right: Jackson Owen, Jerry Martin, Jordan Owen, Julie Owen, Linda Gauldin, Robin Rosson, Gerri Lamie and Adrienne Sheets.



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune  
The "leachate lagoon" aerator runs as contaminated water is pumped to Danville's wastewater treatment plant.

the atmosphere," said Martin of a 2018 fire that necessitated one million gallons of water to extinguish. "When we got the fire out, what did they do? Start filling it back up."

"The flames were so high, it was horrible," added Lamie.

In response to complaints against Supervisor Davis, Smitherman said that above all else, he wants the residents of southeast Pittsylvania County, as well as the county at large, to understand the function of county government.

"We get complaints about things all the time that are just completely out of our preview," Smitherman said. "It just reminds me of Civics 101, to understand the branches of government and the responsibilities, roles and duties of every piece of government as well as our citizens. One of the roles of citizens is to understand how government works, and I think we have a misunderstanding in that regard."

Pittsylvania County has no control over flight paths or landfills. The county government is solely tasked with handling land use, Smitherman said. The land-use regulations were enacted 20 years after this landfill was established.

"We have no control over the flight path that goes over my house from New York City to Atlanta. I have no control over the U.S. Navy flying bombing missions over the Smith Mountain Dam. Some people don't like that," Smitherman said. "Similarly, we have no control over the State of Virginia and its regulation of landfills. Period. It is not a regulatory role of local government."

Still, the board of supervisors routinely listens to citizens' concerns in their mission to be a conduit to find answers to citizens' concerns.

"It was very clear by listening to VDH, DEQ and the others, to anyone who was paying attention, that this was squarely a commonwealth of Virginia regulatory authority. It was also exceedingly clear that the landfill was in compliance with all relevant regulations," Smitherman said. "It was also exceedingly clear that the DEQ is very well aware of the complaints of this area regarding noise or smell or debris on the road. It was obvious to me that they checked on every single one of those complaints."

In response to residents' claims that the DEQ has not investigated any of their complaints, Davenport noted, "They investigate any complaint that's there—any. I don't care how far-fetched it may be. They investigate. It's like having the police department that just looks at landfills. They have a whole department that does nothing but that. To say that they don't have a voice—it's simply not true."

Another concern frequently broached by Mountain Hill residents is the belief that leachate water, which is water that has come into contact with solid waste, is used to dust the roads.

"The leachate holding lagoon water is all pumped directly to the Danville city wastewater treatment plant," Setliff said. "Pond water is used for dust control, not leachate water. It doesn't even make sense why we would do that."

Residents also frequently confuse the stormwater basins for leachate ponds, Setliff said.

As far as the odor is concerned, First Piedmont claims to be understanding. Davenport said he is investing tens of

thousands in odor control technology that is not mandated by DEQ.

"This is cutting-edge, new technology. We feel like that is paramount," Davenport said. "That's the thing that's offensive to the citizens, and I understand that. It is somewhat the nature of a landfill, that it can't be without some odor, but we'd like to control all the odor that we possibly can. We are talking about tens of thousands of dollars we're spending on that."

Smitherman said he is grateful to First Piedmont for its efforts in this area.

"Being a good neighbor is a two-way street," Smitherman said. "They are earnestly attempting to be that good neighbor, and I think that they should be recognized for that effort."

Smitherman said he will never cease to receive citizens' complaints, no matter if he's heard them before or not.

"The county has absolutely no authority over landfills. There is nothing more than we can do about that," he said. "We can continue to listen to the concerns of that community, we can continue to provide access to the folks who can provide solid answers to this community that is feeling unrecognized in this process, but there is no regulatory authority in Pittsylvania County to act on any of the things they are complaining about."

Smitherman said his tactic is to speak the truth and support with facts. He said he deals with misinformation on a daily basis.

"It's interesting how much people believe they understand, until they find out what the truth is," Smitherman said. "The folks in the community that want to learn, that want to understand and want to be productive, appreciate how we handle those type calls of alarm. You cannot make up a situation to suit your fancy. It must be in concert with reality, and the reality in this case is that the County of Pittsylvania is not a regulatory authority over landfills in Virginia."

Save our Rural Community still feels county administration could and should be doing more.

Of the county's response to their concerns, Sheets said, "This is all a prime example of their incompetence. They are absolutely not qualified for the jobs they have."

Davis said he has encouraged First Piedmont to do better, but is satisfied with its current arrangement.

"Despite the fact that First Piedmont has remained in compliance with its permits and the guidelines of all regulating agencies and has consistently gone above and beyond to work with the surrounding community, I have encouraged them to continue finding ways to be an even better neighbor. As a result, First Piedmont has invested tens of thousands of dollars in state-of-the-art technology aimed at reducing the odors that come out of the landfill," Davis said. "I am thankful that First Piedmont has taken these steps, which aren't required of them, to be an excellent neighbor for the Mountain Hill community and all of Pittsylvania County."

Davenport maintains the accusations made by residents of Mountain Hill are nothing more than rumors.

"We have spent a lifetime as a company making this county the best place to live," Davenport said. "We want to do everything in our power to make that happen."

# “The county has failed”

## Outrage ensues on receipt of property valuation letter

By **ELIAS WEISS**  
*Star-Tribune Digital  
Coordinator / Staff Writer*

Pittsylvania County property owners were recently mailed a letter about 2022 property reassessment, which was met with sheer indignation.

The county issued an apology

Saturday for what they called “poor editing” in the letter, but county residents overwhelmingly say administrators are merely backtracking. The original letter seemed to claim that the value of a home would be docked if property owners refused to let assessors into the house, which sparked outrage as Virginia is currently undergoing record-high COVID-19 deaths per

day amid this tempestuous global pandemic. Allowing strangers into the house goes against the CDC’s preventative guidelines, especially for Pittsylvania County’s higher-than-average elderly populace.

Further county residents fear for invasion of privacy, citing the use of drones to collect photo and video without the consent of homeowners, while others have taken notice

of more minor errors with the original letter, such as it being mailed to renters, even though it only applies to owners.

“Letting a stranger into your home, especially during a pandemic, is stupid,” said John Craine, a property owner in Sandy Level. “The county has failed on this reassessment process.”

**See ASSESSMENT, page 2A**

# Assessment

Continued from page 1A

The county claims they never intended to threaten property owners should they not allow inspectors inside, even though the letter states, "You can certainly refuse to allow access to the inside of your home... but at that point assumptions will be applied, which could affect your property's valuation."

"We apologize for the confusion caused by poor editing on our part," said Nicholas Morris, Pittsylvania County assistant director of public works, in a statement. "You are welcome to invite the property assessor in to show features that you feel may significantly change the value of your property. Brightminds'

assessors will not insist on entering your home."

A social media survey found the majority of Pittsylvania County homeowners did not find the original letter confusing. Rather, most found it threatening. The use of drones to gather photo and video of private residences has been exceptionally admonished by local residents.

"Someone pulling up to my property and launching a drone is a violation of my privacy," Craine said.

Nearly all county homeowners agree, per the survey.

"They will not be coming into my home," Chatham taxpayer Jacqueline Crawley-Moser said.

"It's a violation of my family's privacy. And if they try to come in, they better be ready to fend off my dog because he don't play those games with strangers."

For one property owner, this is just another iteration in what she says is a misleading and deceptive pattern in the county government.

"The county administrator [David Smitherman] said exactly what he meant," Chatham resident Jordan Kee said. "This is how our illustrious county administrator runs the ship. Just failures in this county over and over."

Ron Scarce, vice chairman of the Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors, apologized, saying the board offered a "poor

explanation" and encouraging county residents to help the assessors generate as accurate a report as possible when the time comes. Administrators maintained that property value would not automatically be lowered if the owner does not allow entry, but rather it stands the chance to be lowered because the report will be unthorough.

"We apologize for not understanding the potential misinterpretation of the reassessment letter and information request's wording," Smitherman said. "We are committed to communicating with better care, precision and frequency thought the 2022

reassessment process."

By law, reassessment of properties is to be conducted in Pittsylvania County every four years. Updated property values will go into effect Jan. 1, 2022, but will not have an impact on the current property tax rate, which is 62 cents per \$100 in assessed value, according to a county press statement.

"A mistake of this magnitude is almost unbelievable," Cascade resident Rick Meeks said. "There must have been a real protest for [the county] to retract this. Well, you tried, and it didn't work."

"I tossed this assessment letter directly into the trash... waste of money," Craine added.