

# Our Forum

## An open mind on Pierceville

To be clear, Joe Luter — either III or IV — shouldn't get a free pass on developing the former Pierceville property just because he's Joe Luter. No one deserves such blind confidence.

That said, the Luter family's long track record of generosity and loyalty to this community merit a collective open mind by citizens as preliminary plans for the Pierceville property are finalized, then reviewed by the town's Planning Commission and Town Council.

The Planning Commission took an important first step with project skeptics last week by tabling an effort to add a mixed-use designation to the town's zoning ordinance. Such a preemptive zoning change would have been an obvious effort to grease the skids for the Luters' "Grange at 10Main," an ambitious residential-commercial development on 50-plus acres at the western edge of the historic district.

The new zoning option would allow single-family and multi-family housing, bed-and-breakfast lodging, retail stores and other uses to coexist on a single parcel. Such a designation would seem perfectly scripted for the Luters' Pierceville project, which, according to preliminary plans presented recently to town and county elected officials, would include a 13,300-square-foot indoor/outdoor farmers market with 150 underground parking spaces, 902 more parking spaces above ground, 225 apartments, a hotel, 45 single-family homes and duplexes and 33,350 square feet of commercial space.

We find much to like — and some things to dislike — in the Luters' plan.

The Smithfield Farmers Market, which is immensely popular with local folks and consistently draws day-trippers from throughout the region, deserves a better home than a bank parking lot. We're certain that the market would grow and continue to thrive in a modern indoor-outdoor facility on the edge of town. We're especially pleased that the market would front Main Street and be the most visible structure in the Grange development.

Given the nearly full occupancy of existing retail space downtown, even after the challenges of the COVID economy, we're also glad that the plans call for significant commercial space. An easy walk from current retail shops in the heart of downtown, businesses on the Pierceville land would draw shoppers already in the habit of coming downtown — and reciprocate by sending new customers, including occupants of the Grange residential units, a few blocks east.

The town should insist on continuous streetscapes that match the 100, 200 and 300 blocks of Main Street. That should be an easy sell for Luter, as Smithfield Foods was the primary funder of downtown beautification in the 1990s. That project was transformative, turning a dying retail district into the envy of small towns everywhere.

We'd prefer fewer than 270 housing units given the project's proximity to the historic district, and the 60-foot height allowance contemplated in the tabled mixed-use zoning designation must be scrapped. Above all else, the developers must visually blend the new structures with the rest of downtown. A five-story apartment building would stick out like a sore thumb.

Count us as cautiously optimistic. From the Smithfield Foods headquarters campus and the Smithfield Center to Windsor Castle Park and the Luter Sports Complex on the western edge of town, Joe Luter III and the company he led have immeasurably enhanced Smithfield's economy and quality of life for its citizens over the years. We're confident he'd never be part of something that caused irreparable harm to Smithfield.

Yet, town officials must be diligent in their oversight and eventual decision on what to allow on the property. Last week's decision by the Planning Commission to table a new mixed-use zoning designation and judge the Pierceville plan independently on its merits was an encouraging sign. We keep an open mind, hopeful that the Luters and town officials will strike the right balance of progress and protecting Smithfield's quaint way of life.

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## Bad optics

LSMP LLC, the Luter-owned company looking to develop the former Pierceville property on the edge of Smithfield's historic district, was certainly not alone in wanting Glenn Youngkin to win Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial race. The state's business community was as motivated as we've seen in years to put a Republican in the Governor's Mansion.

But the degree of LSMP's investment — a cool \$1 million contribution to Youngkin in October — will surely cause even deeper scrutiny of any taxpayer involvement in “The Grange at 10 Main,” a proposed mixed-use development on the site of the razed Little's Supermarket and 1730s-era farmhouse known as Pierceville.

Why, the logic goes, would a developer with the wherewithal to drop \$1 million in a political race need help from taxpayers on a project that stands to make a handsome profit in the years ahead?

News of the massive Youngkin donation, reported by The Times' Stephen Faleski in last week's edition, comes at a time when Isle of Wight County supervisors, who are being asked to pony up more than \$1 million for a new farmers market as a signature feature of the Grange project, have been openly skeptical of the expenditure. District 1 Supervisor Don Rosie said at a meeting this month that he believed the project was being forced on the county. We'll see if a significantly reduced price tag — the county originally was asked for \$3 million — gets a more favorable reaction when the Board of Supervisors next convenes. The Smithfield Town Council seems much more excited about its contribution.

We remain generally supportive of the “The Grange” project, even as we acknowledge that the Luters did themselves no favors in the court of public opinion by using their Pierceville-related LLC to finance a statewide political campaign. After all, a million bucks would nearly cover the county's or town's requested contribution for a new farmers market.

The campaign donation was eye-popping by any standard. Consider that, in a race in which Youngkin raked in \$50 million from all across the state and country, LSMP's donation was the largest single donation other than from Republican Party groups and from the candidate himself. For further perspective, Smithfield Foods, the company built by the Luter family and now the world's largest pork producer, gave less than \$50,000 to the two major gubernatorial candidates combined.

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## Secrecy is killing 'Grange' support

A common misconception of Virginia's open-meetings law is that public bodies *must* go into closed session to discuss certain topics. That's wrong.

The Freedom of Information Act doesn't even say they *should*. It simply says they *may* do so in certain circumstances.

The Smithfield Town Council and Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors, which are doing their best to undermine the citizenry's confidence in their handling of a controversial real estate development on the western edge of town, need a refresher course on the importance of transparent government. If the Town Council gets an "F" on transparency after their recent secret discussion preceding a vote to spend \$1.4 million in taxpayer dollars, the supervisors get a D-minus. They at least had some discussion preceding their vote on the identical topic but, disturbingly, failed to list the matter on their published Oct. 20 agenda so that interested citizens could attend and speak on the matter during the meeting's public comment period.

For the record, we believe that taxpayer investment in a new farmers market on the site of the future "Grange at 10Main" mixed-use development has merit, though much more information is needed for us to give it our full-throated endorsement. Likewise, we look favorably on the Luter family's bigger plans for the property, though details are worryingly scarce for the town and county to already be pledging millions of dollars to the property.

The Town Council's public image, still reeling from approval of a massive new housing development off Battery Park Road, is tattered. Its members are going to make it worse with more secret discussions like what preceded the commitment of millions of tax dollars to the Luters' "Grange" development and expansion of a sports complex that bears the family's name. We're surprised, and disappointed, that county supervisors, whose constituents are even less than enthusiastic about the Luters' plans for the former Pierceville property, would put their own image at stake.

The Luters deserve better. They've been very open about the Grange project, even paying for a full-page ad in this newspaper to explain why they believe it to be a good thing for the town. When town and county officials turn around and shroud the project in secrecy, the citizenry loses faith in both the developer and the officials they elected to serve them.

We're fast losing hope that the "Grange" and a new farmers market will be thoroughly vetted and eventually supported by the community whose confidence is essential to the project's success.