

# Our Forum

## Disclose proposed Grange subsidies

As the Grange at 10Main barrels toward May public hearings on a long list of requested zoning changes and conditional use permits, it's time for the developer and town officials to put all of their cards on the table.

Smithfield Planning Commissioner Dr. Thomas Pope pointed out the elephant in the room when developer Joseph Luter IV met with the commission this month about his big plans for the former Pierceville property on the western outskirts of the historic district: 304 single-family and multifamily residences, a new structure for the town's farmers market, a hotel and retail space. Pope wanted to know precisely what taxpayer investment is sought for the project, but he got no clear answers.

There's lots to like about Luter's proposed development from our vantage point, but like Pope, we have some serious heartburn about taxpayer subsidization of residential and commercial development. The town and county have never done it before and would set a risky precedent by doing it for the Grange. Besides, as noted on this week's front page, Isle of Wight is one of Virginia's 10 fastest-growing localities. Frankly, this community doesn't have to subsidize residential growth. It's already happening, and, in the opinion of many citizens, too quickly.

Both the town and county have already pledged up to \$1.4 million for the farmers market, matching Luter's commitment of \$1 million and the land it would be built on. While the price tag seems high, we have no beef with spending taxpayer money on a public venue.

Still a mystery, though, are the developer's expectations of taxpayer reimbursement for infrastructure costs throughout the development and of an "economic development incentive" for the hotel. If these subsidies are essential to the project, they must be quantified and debated now.

Planning commissioners and Town Council members cannot make an informed decision on zoning changes until the proposed taxpayer subsidies are fully vetted.

Once the train is rolling down the track after zoning approvals, the excuse for approving taxpayer subsidies will be that they are needed to prevent a trainwreck. That's not the taxpayers' problem. They deserve the information now.

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## Critical info still missing on Grange

Smithfield Town Council members should insist on a full set of facts before casting a series of critical votes on the Grange at 10Main, the ambitious mixed-use development proposed for the western edge of the historic district.

That includes details of the developer's expectation of taxpayer funding of some of the project's infrastructure. To date, all citizens and council members know is that Joseph Luter IV plans to seek some sort of reimbursement from the town and Isle of Wight County, which already have pledged millions in funding for a new farmers market that would be a centerpiece of the Grange and house the development's restaurant.

What little is known currently about taxpayer involvement in the project is the result of transparency by county government, which provided to this newspaper a January document laying out the developer's then expectations of receiving 75% of town and county tax revenues caused by the development for seven years to repay him for more than \$7 million in infrastructure (\$10 million-plus with interest). Luter has since said that updated estimates are much lower, but he refused to give them to a town planning commissioner who pushed for details and told the Times last week that neither will Town Council members be given them before an Aug. 1 public hearing and possible vote on rezoning the property.

Luter first said in May that the town had instructed him not to release the information pre-zoning, then backtracked and said that he was following a supposedly widely understood process for such matters, an assertion backed by the town attorney, though neither has cited any statutory prohibition on town officials having full financing information before making a decision. Of interest, Luter wants council members to consider in their zoning votes the tax revenues the project will cause, but how much of that revenue is proposed to go to him and his partners is none of the council's business at this stage.

Surely the council will demand a net number. Once the property is rezoned as Planned Mixed Use Development, or PMUD, it would eliminate an important step in the approval process for future developers who seek to do something similar with the property should the Luter project fall through.

We talk to many citizens and public officials, both town and county, who share our view that the Grange would be good for Smithfield but shouldn't be subsidized by taxpayers. A new narrative being floated by project promoters, including Luter's Virginia Beach business partners, is that this is the way such projects get done. That might be the case in the big cities where they live and do business, but it would be unprecedented in Smithfield, which doesn't aspire to be another Virginia Beach or Chesapeake or Newport News. With due respect, we don't need consultants from those places telling us how development works. We're quite intelligent enough to assess the facts, if given them, and understand what is in our community's best interest.

If the Grange needs town and county taxpayers' involvement in order to be built, a council member should know that, and to what extent, before rezoning the property.

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## Grange plan better, but still too risky

Joseph Luter IV's new iteration of the Grange at 10Main, an ambitious mixed-use development on the edge of Smithfield's historic district, is significantly improved from the one derailed by widespread community outrage last summer. Sadly, town leadership lacks the gumption — and Luter the patience — to fix its remaining flaws and ensure a project that does more good than harm.

The breakneck pace at which town officials are rushing a rezoning vote — thorough vetting be damned — is a reminder that this process was never about engaging with citizens and building a project that's right for Smithfield and its superb historic district. It was about finding the votes on the Town Council to approve it.

The abrupt departure of Wayne Hall, who along with Mike Smith and Jeff Brooks had thrown the brakes on the Grange when the earlier version hit the council, gives project supporters the opening they needed to pounce. Never mind that, if the vote is taken next week as expected, as few as five people on a seven-member board will decide the fate of a project that will forever transform, for good or bad, Downtown Smithfield. Goodness, the irony.

If transparency and citizen participation were true values of town leadership, the Planning Commission would have held a public hearing on the new Grange plan, taken citizen input to heart and worked with Luter to improve his application, especially its still-inadequate plan to control traffic on Grace and Cary streets, the crown jewels of residential living downtown. Instead, town staff chose not to even schedule a public hearing. Planning commissioners dutifully followed the town attorney's coaching to take a vote that very night. Both were choices, not requirements.

We're pleased that Luter slightly reduced the project's density and removed four-story buildings. And at least for now, taxpayers appear to be off the hook for infrastructure expense other than a farmers market. On the downside, the lone change to traffic flow, an entrance off Mill Swamp Road, isn't enough. Downtown residents are right to be livid. The town also deserves much more specificity about how the residential and commercial components will be phased. Think Benn's Grant for what can go horribly wrong when residential is prioritized.

We've heard a lot from Grange supporters about honoring the Luter family's legacy in Smithfield. It says here that they are risking great harm to that legacy by ramrodding a project that lacks safeguards to ensure its appropriateness for a community that is nothing without its small-town charm, which Joseph Luter III worked benevolently and tirelessly to enhance and preserve.

History will view favorably Smith, Brooks and others who've asked questions and raised concerns. The Grange plan is much improved because of their efforts. It has the potential to be even better.