

Toll on our land

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Want to start an argument in a hurry? Mention a local development project in Brunswick County. You'll open a Pandora's Box of political, economic, environmental and cultural concerns and perhaps unleash a torrent of profanity. Whatever the project, however necessary to support our growth and to serve the county's citizens, nobody wants it in their backyard.

Many of us helped fuel Brunswick County's explosive growth. Unless you're a descendant of the Cape Fear area's indigenous tribes, your ancestors came from elsewhere, whether across the ocean (voluntary or at the mercy of slave traders) or over land. Brunswick County has much to recommend it in terms of climate, terrain, proximity to beaches and a reasonable cost of living.

Unfortunately, our rapid growth has taken a toll on our land, water, infrastructure, and institutions. Improvements such as the long-awaited widening of Route 211 also strain our patience as construction proceeds.

While we might want to curtail development to protect our interests, that's not an option. We need to ensure that future development will safeguard the aspects of the life here that we treasure. As communities across America have learned, thoughtful development can occur when impacts are understood and mitigated in the design, engineering, construction and operation of new projects.

Making this happen requires engaging stakeholders: the individuals and organizations often ignored as new development projects seem to be "railroaded" through the local approval process. Stakeholders include but aren't limited to abutting property owners, nonprofit organizations, and experts in academia and the business community with institutional knowledge of local conditions.

When stakeholder input is valued, development impacts can be mitigated to balance the interests of all parties. Rather than maintaining an adversarial relationship with the public, a developer can earn the trust of skeptics by listening to and accommodating useful input.

Does this sound like a fantasy world? Perhaps, but many of us moved here from communities where this process was the norm. It's time that it became more prevalent here in Brunswick County. We cannot stand by as our local politicians grant developers their every desire, ruining the things about Southport and Brunswick County that we hold so dear.

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