

THE PILOT



"A long time ago, a wise editor said, 'The function of a newspaper is "to print the news and raise hell." I haven't been able to improve upon that definition.'"

Sam Ragan, Editor and Publisher, 1968-1996

Fewer Meetings,
Less Public Input

Long before it declared a month ago it was an "oversight" board, the Moore County Board of Education was an "operations" board.

Under former Schools Superintendent Bob Grimesey — and continuing with successor Tim Locklair — the school board has expanded its reach and responsibilities far beyond what the legislature ever intended for such elected bodies.

As recently as earlier this month, board members stumbled through a staff-led briefing session on a new digital classroom management platform. If they were any deeper in the weeds, they would have needed orange caps.

And so it seemed incongruous at best — and suspicious, at worst — when later in that same meeting school board Vice Chair David Hensley suggested the board reduce its meeting schedule.

"We have too many meetings," he said. "We are an oversight board."

Hensley suggested the "battle rhythm" was too fast for board members and the district's professional staff. Instead of the current two meetings a month — plus additional committee meetings that Hensley and board Chair Robert Levy created earlier this year — Hensley is seeking meetings every other month.

Less Public Interaction

Hensley uses as his rationale a state law that mandates school boards meet a minimum of four times a year. By his thinking, the board's committees could handle more detailed matters. But board committees, which usually contain two or three board members and staff, can't vote on anything.

Further, although the committee meetings are public, they're usually held during working hours when few people can attend, and they're not live streamed or recorded for later viewing, unlike the twice monthly meetings.

"Our constituency expects to interact with the school board on a basis that's much more often," Levy said. "When we do this committee stuff, we're only interacting with ourselves. We're not interacting with the general public."

Exactly. Hensley is proposing that more work pertinent to the public get pushed down and out of view of that public.

And while Hensley worries about taking up staff time with the twice monthly meetings, there's no evidence or reason to believe staff will spend less time preparing for committee meetings and dealing with the daily barrage of emails and requests from board members on issues.

Indeed, Locklair says he and the central office staff work "almost on a daily basis" preparing data for the board or working on members' requests for information.

This doesn't sound like a sincere desire to work more efficiently. It sounds like an attempt to avoid public oversight.

Are They Slacking?

The school board regularly asks the public for input, whether drafting a new strategic plan, an annual calendar or concerns about curriculum. No one on this board, despite discussing the subject on March 6 and 13, bothered to suggest letting the public weigh in.

But perhaps they already know what the public would say. Board members Philip Holmes, Pauline Bruno and Levy expressed doubt about changing how they meet.

"We ran on oversight," said Holmes. "We have F-rated schools and there's things that need our attention monthly. I wouldn't support it for that reason."

And Bruno, rightly, worries about the optics of having fewer meetings that allow for public comment and input.

"My biggest problem is the perception from the community, like, are we slacking? I have a big problem with that," she said.

Levy stressed that the public should see the full board in action.

"We generally have it so our plate is full at these monthly meetings," he said. "And we also have a whole bunch of constituents who on a monthly basis bring us a whole bunch of problems."

"We're here for a purpose. We're much better off showing our constituency we're here every month."

If the "battle rhythm" is too fast for Mr. Hensley or any other board members, perhaps they should go back to the rear and get some rest. Public service, at its core, is serving the public need, not your own.

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FLASHBACK: RACE INTO SPRING



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MOORE COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Stoneybrook Steeplechase was an annual spring ritual in the Sandhills. First run in 1946, the event featured horse races, a hat contest and creative tailgating before it was discontinued in 2016.

Funerals Must Survive So
We Can All Celebrate Life

Hey, everyone, let's play "informal poll"! It'll be fun. Promise. Okay, here goes. Raise your hand if you like to attend funerals.

No hands? OK, so the results of my informal but exhaustive poll are finally in. No one likes to attend funerals.

That being the case, then, why do we attend them? Well, mostly because it's the right thing to do.

I was blessed with good parents who taught me many things, the vast majority of them "right things to do." One of those things was that funerals were important milestones in life. If I knew the person who died and it was possible, Mom and Dad taught me, I should attend the dearly departed's funeral. It was, they said, the right thing to do to gather together to celebrate their life and send them off to the Great Beyond — and to console their loved ones with the knowledge that people cared.

Life is funny in so many ways but also because, while there's sadness at the loss of a life well-lived, there was much humor and laughing, as is often the case. So it was at a funeral I attended a couple of weeks ago in eastern North Carolina.

I learned some things about Steve at his final send-off, things I would never have known about him if I had not attended his funeral. This

is true even though we commiserated together as fellow Marines, sat across from each other eight hours a day in the same office for years, and we broke bread together, including several times in our homes.

I discovered the humor and magic in his life at his funeral, all of which highlighted three things about attending funerals.

■ Wally Bock, also a Marine, writes in his blog Threestarleadership.com, "Everybody you meet and everyone who works for you has something special and wonderful. Sometimes you can see it and sometimes you can't. But it's there. Everyone you will ever deal with has a magical something." Steve did too.

■ Both my mother and mother-in-law used to say, "Life is for the living. Don't wallow in grief. Get on with life." Likewise, funerals are for the living. They provide a chance to collectively grieve and remember, to express our gratitude for having known the person who died and humbly acknowledge our own mortality too.

■ Funerals provide a vital lesson that we should make our peace with God now because we never know when we'll be called Home. Only God knows the hour of our calling.

Steve was a retired master gunnery sergeant — attaining the highest rank one can earn in

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Barry Fetzer
Columnist

THE PUBLIC SPEAKING

School Assignment
Called into Question

There must be a better solution to Moore County Schools boundary lines for middle school students. My neighbors have three children at Southern Pines Elementary and recently received a letter from MCS informing them that their oldest has been assigned to Crain's Creek Middle School next year.

Most of the students in her class will be attending Southern Middle, which is just 3 miles from my neighborhood, while Crain's Creek is 12.9 miles away.

According to data published on MCS's website, there are 695 students at Southern Middle this year, and only 420 at Crain's Creek, so I see why district leadership wants to redistribute Moore County middle-schoolers. However, with the ever-present busing issues in our county, is sending students to a school 13 miles away when their nearest is 10 miles closer really the answer, especially when there are only five bus drivers assigned to

The Pilot welcomes letters from readers. Email them to letters@thepilot.com or mail them to 145 W. Pennsylvania Ave., Southern Pines, NC 28387. Letters must include name, phone number and city of residence and may be edited for length and content. The limit is 300 words.

Crain's Creek (per the MCS website)?

Unless my neighbors receive a variance to Southern Middle, Moore County Schools will lose another bright young student to homeschooling, where 11 percent of our K-12 students currently get their education, according to MyFutureNC.org.

W. Tori Williams
Southern Pines

Dumpster Fire

Teachers at Crain's Creek Middle told Schools Superintendent Tim Locklair in October they were going to quit if he moved Melonie Jones out as principal. He moved her anyway and a bunch of them quit.

Since January 2023, Moore County Schools has lost teachers at a higher and faster rate than Hoke County, Cumberland County, Montgomery County

and Lee County.

People say I am intellectually disabled, but I'm smart enough to know a dumpster fire when I see one.

Jessica Christy Bowman
West End

Why Raise the Tax?

Do I understand correctly? The local Convention and Visitors Bureau has a fund balance of \$1.7 million. The CVB is only required to keep \$260,000, which is 10 percent of its operating budget, in its fund balance.

The CVB wants to distribute \$1 million in one-time grants to towns and nonprofits for tourism projects. The CVB receives this money from the Moore County occupancy tax. The CVB wants to distribute these grants to drum up support for increasing the occupancy tax from 3 percent to 6 percent.

If the CVB has a \$1.7 million fund balance from a 3 percent occupancy tax, why do they want the occupancy tax increased to 6 percent?

Margaret Smetana
Pinehurst