Here we go again – the ‘Z’ word returns

Guest commentary

hash the well-worn debates over zoning.

As academics who live and work in the region, we have studied, public opinion on zoning in Western North Carolina dating back to 2003. Our work on zoning has led to five key observations that provide some context for the current issues facing Buncombe County.

The key issues

First, these debates are not unique to Buncombe County. For example, The Smoky Mountain News reported that, in 2002, Macon County Commission candidates ran on a platform of development. Another responded, “I’m not for zoning. I don’t like anyone telling me what I can do with my property.”

A third commented that he “didn’t think anyone who owned property would support zoning.”

Jackson County commissioners passed a construction moratorium in 2007 while hammering out subdivision and steep-slope ordinances.

Third, our work highlights the types of people who tend to support zoning measures. In both 2003 and 2007, we found that older, more highly educated people are more likely to support zoning than younger, less educated people.

In addition, we found that ideological liberals and people who are new to the region are more likely to support zoning than conservatives and longtime residents.

Fourth, our research has convinced us that words matter. In our 2007 survey, we asked half our sample of their opinions on “zoning” and the other half opinions on “land use planning.” We found that support for land use planning was considerably higher than support for zoning.

Zoning is a much more polarizing term than land use planning, and we urge public administrators to use the ‘z’ word with caution.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our research has demonstrated the importance of trust in government. We found that a person’s level of trust in local government has a substantial influence on an individual’s support for zoning. We discovered that folks were more willing to cede power to government if they trust local government.

Now more than ever, it is important for the Buncombe County Commissioners to take public feedback seriously, learn to compromise and develop policies that have the support of the greatest number of the county’s citizens.

Christopher Cooper is an associate professor of political science and public affairs at Western Carolina University, where he directs the Public Policy Institute and the master’s degree program in public affairs.

Gibbs Knotts is an associate professor and department head of political science and public affairs at WCU. One of his articles on zoning, co-written by Kathleen Brennan of the WCU sociology department, “The Importance of Trust in Government for Public Administration: The Case of Zoning,” appears in the May/June 2008 edition of Public Administration Review.

Federal Reserve also carries serious blame for economic mess

SO, YOU'RE TESTING LONG RANGE MISSILES, TOO?

For the financial crisis that has wiped out trillions in wealth, many have felt the lash of public outrage.


Obama is doing.

Indeed, in 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt lacerated Hoover for having presided over the “greatest spending administration in peacetime in all of history.” His running mate, John Nance Garner, accused Hoover of “leading the country down the path to socialism.” And “Cactus Jack” Roosevelt was no more sympathetic.

Syndicated columnist Pat Buchanan