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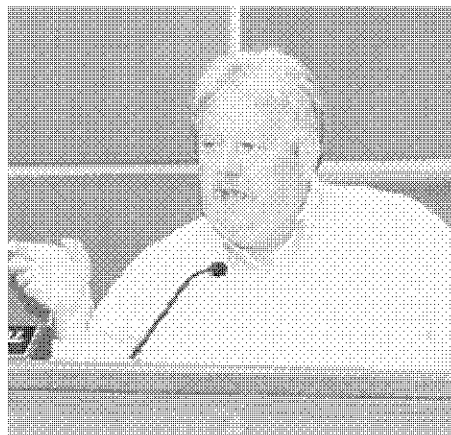
Tuesday, May 05, 2009

## Showdown At The County Seat

### **Brian Haney**

Daily Record Reporter

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Harnett County Board of Commissioners Chairman Tim McNeill, left, explains his position on a resolution supporting a state bill that would allow county fees to be used on park construction. -

Amid all the passionate debate at yesterday's Harnett County Board of Commissioners meeting, the most heated battle had nothing to do with the property revaluation or the Harnett Forward Together Committee.

Instead, it was between Board Chairman Tim McNeill and state Rep. David Lewis.

The two elected Republicans engaged in a war of words about a piece of state legislation that would allow the county to use developer fees to develop and construct recreational facilities.

Presently the county can purchase the land, but is not allowed to use the fees for construction.

In a letter addressed to state Sen. Harris Blake and Reps. Lewis and Jimmy Love, the board asked for help in passing legislation to allow for construction.

The letter also asked that a fee cap of \$500 per residential construction lot and a sunset provision be removed from the legislation.

Commissioner Gary House expressed concern the letter had been addressed from the entire board without his knowledge. He said he did not support the removal of the \$500 cap.

At yesterday's meeting, Rep. Lewis took issue that the board was voting on a resolution in support

Daily Record Photos/Brian Haney of the bill when the public had not been made aware of the resolution.



"I have been here two hours and still have not seen the resolution," he said, "and I believe the public should be allowed to see it (before a vote is taken)."

He said he was also opposed to the \$500 per lot fee for people building houses.

"I cannot support raising additional fees that are passed on to the home builder," Rep. Lewis said.

Rep. Lewis introduced similar legislation in 2007 that made it through the state House, but was stopped in the Senate.

He said he declined to introduce the new bill because he does not support it.

"The economy was much better (in 2007) than it is now," he said.

Above, state Rep. David Lewis and Mr. McNeill exchanged heated words as Rep. Lewis disagreed with the legislation as well as Mr. McNeill's accusations that he represents lobbyists.

Rep. Lewis said the original bill died because Mr. McNeill didn't like the \$500 cap and had said if he couldn't get the bill he wanted, he didn't want any bill at all.

Mr. McNeill refuted the charge, saying the bill Rep. Lewis was trying to pass was a substitute bill, written by lobbyists that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

"If we couldn't have the original bill, we didn't need the other one," he said.

When Rep. Lewis would not introduce the new legislation, the board turned to Rep. Jimmy Love who did.

He Said, He Said

Chairman McNeill questioned whether Rep. Lewis represented the home builder's lobby in Raleigh or the citizens of Harnett County and keeping their property taxes lower.

Rep. Lewis said he did not appreciate Mr. McNeill's implications that his loyalties lie anywhere other than with the taxpayers.

Rep. Lewis charged that fees raised on one side of the county could be used to fund parks on the other side of the county.

"Nowhere in the law does it say (funding from) one side of the county can be spent on the other," Mr. McNeill said.

He said the legislation would allow fees for developers of major subdivisions, not single families trying to build a home.

"This is a way of paying an impact fee for growth," Mr. McNeill said.

He said it was a way to help keep the taxpayers' property taxes lower.

"It comes down to who's going to pay for this," Commissioner Dan Andrews said, "the home builders or the people who pay taxes."

Rep. Lewis said he supported facilities that are going to be used by all to be paid for by all.

"We want to build a park for the citizens here to enjoy," Mr. McNeill said, "but it won't be (built) out of the taxpayers' pockets.

He said it was about using the money to protect the citizens already living in Harnett County.

"We're not trying to blow smoke and mirrors or anything else," he said.

"While I have, in most cases, yielded to the county commissioners, with all due respect I do not agree with Commissioner McNeill's original request," Rep. Lewis said, "and I do not believe the majority of people want to raise the fees."

Commissioner Jim Burgin said he had only been given the letter Friday at the commissioners work session and hadn't seen the resolution until the morning of the vote.

"I don't think we ought to vote until we've had time to look at it," he said.

Mr. Burgin moved to table the resolution. His motion was seconded by Commissioner House. It failed in a 2-to-3 vote.

A motion to approve the resolution was made by Commissioner Andrews and seconded by Commissioner Beatrice Hill.

Mr. House said he supported the bill as written, without the removal of the \$500 cap, but disagreed with some of the wording in the resolution.

He asked that the board's support of "any successor versions or other similar bills" be removed from the resolution.

Mr. Andrews and Ms. Hill agreed to amend their motion and it passed 4-to-1.

Mr. Burgin voted against the motion because he said he felt he should be given time to think about his vote.

This is not the first time Rep. Lewis and local elected leaders have clashed.

Last year the Town of Lillington thanked now Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton and Rep. Lewis' opponent Joe Tart for their help in the town obtaining a parks grant that is now being used to build a recreation center. Rep. Lewis wasn't mentioned.

Also, Lillington passed a resolution against North Carolina lawmakers, including Rep. Lewis, who supported a moratorium on involuntary annexation.

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