

Common Sense and Uncommon Greed

In days gone by it was common for schoolchildren to memorize these lines from Longfellow about the patriot and hero of the Revolutionary War, Paul Revere:

*Listen my children and
you shall hear
Of the midnight ride
of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April,
in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that
famous day and year.*

Revere was famous, of course, for alerting his neighbors to the danger of an enemy invasion. Given the warning, the farmers and small landowners of that day fought fiercely for their lives and homes. **And they won.**

Now Paul Revere is in the saddle once more in the form of **Laurel Valley Watch**, a group of regular Madison County citizens in the Ebbs Chapel area who are fighting the nightmarish development proposals that recently passed through the Planning and Zoning Board on January 24 on their way to the county commissioners. **LVW** is raising the alarm about the cultural and environmental devastation our county will suffer if this morally corrupt plan is approved. Just as in Revere's day, time is short, but there's hope if we act now. **We can win, too.**

Myrtle Beach In The Mountains?

Have you ever been to Myrtle Beach? It's a great place for a vacation—sand, sunshine, playing in the waves. It's fun to walk around and look at things (don't expect to drive far or fast in that traffic, though). It's like a carnival: gaudy and trashy, but nice enough for a change of pace. What would it be like, however, if you weren't allowed to go home after the vacation was over? What if Myrtle Beach **was** home, and everyone there was on vacation but you?

Myrtle Beach is an example of a community that didn't integrate tourism into its economy; it surrendered to it. Closer to home we have Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, TN. Great places to visit—**wouldn't want to live there.** In Las Vegas it's the slot machines; somewhere else it may be Funland with cotton candy and bumper cars. But wherever it is, one thing is always the same: there's no room and no time for anything other than stoking the furnace of the resort/tourist industry. Any other ways those communities might have developed were foreclosed long ago.

The Rich Man Wants Something You Got

Lucky you! You live in a beautiful place where the air is cool and sweet. You get to hear birds sing in the morning when you get up, and you can see the stars through your window at night when you go to bed. Your taxes aren't so bad. You shop in towns where the traffic's not too heavy and the prices aren't too high.

Watch your back, though. The same city folks who for years wrote us off as hicks and hillbillies have begun realizing why we want to live here rather than running from muggers

or choking on fumes. Some of these folks have buckets of money, and they're accustomed to buying anything and everything they want. They're obsessed with "views," and they like putting their big houses up on ridges the better to look down. When you have that much money, you're not used to being told "**No, it's not for sale.**" The rich man thinks everything is for sale.

And now the rich man's money is saying that Madison County must change into Mountain Playground™. Don't take it personally—there's certainly no ill will intended for us. It's just that when you have enough money for a second or third house, you have to put it *somewhere*, preferably somewhere nice. We're not special in the sense of tempting the rich man with something unique and tailor-made. He just buys communities like ours off the rack.

Busseyville Or Englishburg: Take Your Pick

Rick Bussey and Orville English are partners in B & E Ventures, the development corporation that is making the request for rezoning several hundred acres in the Upper Laurel Valley from residential/agricultural to residential/resort. What the resort reclassification gets them is essentially a blank check in the kind of construction they're allowed to do. Give these boys some credit. When they concoct a **harebrained get-rich-quick scheme**, they think big!

Here's what they want to do in a nutshell. They want to cover a mountain bottom to top in seven hundred or so housing units: houses, town houses, condos, etc. And they want to do this on **one acre lots**. These structures may or may not be tied into a **sewage line that stretches two miles** back up and over the mountain to the headwaters of Puncheon Fork. After baptizing the turds in a sewage treatment plant, into the creek the whole mess goes. Whether or not Puncheon Fork's trout will have it worse than their Upper Laurel cousins choking on runoff from denuded slopes and leaking septic systems on the other side, who can say?

Down on the wetlands by the new interstate Bussey and English anticipate a thriving commercial presence developing for the swarm of locusts with out of state tags that they are so eager for us to host. In the January 24th zoning board meeting Bussey spoke enthusiastically of banks, convenience stores, gas stations, restaurants, chain motels, and more spreading along both sides of the road from exit 3 of I-26 all the way up into Laurel Valley. It takes quite an ego to propose dropping an entire city wholesale smack down on an intact rural community, but hey, that's probably why you and I aren't cut out to be developers. We're not arrogant enough.

Think I'm kidding about it being an entire city? B & E Ventures is talking about seven hundred units at this point, with more inevitably to follow when they acquire more land. **The entire town of Mars Hill only has five hundred forty houses.** And poor little Mars Hill doesn't even have an airport. Busseyville will, however—cut right into the top of a mountain. Would someone please take Orville English's bulldozers away from him? He's a danger to himself and others.

Helpful Advice When Choosing A Husband

When you're not all the way grown yet, it's hard being a pretty girl. Everyone wants to hold your hand and steal a kiss if they can. What's a pretty girl to do? Those who have sense learn to distinguish between boys that respect them and boys that just want to use them.

Which kind of boys are Orville English and Rick Bussey? It's a good question, but there's a more pointed one to ask. What kind of people would we be to prostitute our land and our future? The metaphor is painful, but apt. We're being asked to sell our mountain home cheap to men who will strip and abuse her. If she had a voice her cries would echo up and down these valleys. The rich man's money is pitiless, however, and his huckster puppets who **ought to know better** have steeled themselves not to listen.

Simply put, the proposal coming before the county commissioners is not for a development project. If only it were. B & E Ventures proposes, rather, that starting now we all **shut up and watch** as the crudest example of scorched earth, real estate strip-mining in all of western North Carolina unfolds before our very eyes.

In recompense we are offered (1) the promise of future tax revenue that will be nowhere near adequate to offset the added strain on the county's physical and social infrastructure, and (2) construction jobs **that we will have anyway!** The second point is very important. We **can** and **should** grow our Madison County communities in a measured and responsible fashion. There is honorable work for us in doing so. Our county's challenge is the same one faced by a pretty girl beset by suitors — fending off the sleazy fast talkers so that she has time to grow up into the strong and beautiful woman she is meant to be.

The Things That Matter

What counts, for you? What do you have or hope for in your life here that you wouldn't trade away? Is it family? Is it the connection you feel to these mountains? Is it the freedom to worship God in the church of your choice? Is it the feeling that you live among neighbors rather than strangers?

People can't be happy by merely existing somewhere. They're more than just eating and working machines. They have to be *home*. If you've ever had the feeling that God has blessed us here in Madison County, then you already understand what I'm trying to say. It matters that we're wise and honest stewards of this land. It is, after all, God's land. And God means for us to pass it on to our children and grandchildren in the same way that we received it from preceding generations: vigorous and alive, not mortgaged and squeezed dry.

Bright Hope Laurel United Methodist Church sits at the confluence of Puncheon Fork and the Upper Laurel, virtually at ground zero of Busseyville. The sign at the church this week reads "**We become what we think of ourselves.**" Given that the steep slopes overlooking this sign may soon be ripped asunder and then infested with houses stacked one on top of another, we must give careful attention to what these words mean.

Who do we think we are? Should we believe them when they tell us that all we're good for is hosting a glorified outdoor amusement park for someone else's benefit? If so, then second-class custodians are what we in this county in some measure will become. Our ancestors were poor, but they served no man; their stubborn independence is our heritage. If, like Esau, we trade away that birthright for a mess of pottage, then we will have defiled their memory.

To honor their memory and to earn the lasting respect of our children, we will need to think highly of ourselves. And we will need to think for ourselves.

Altar Call

When the preaching's over you stand on your feet for the hymn of decision. If you're bothered, upset even, by what you've read (and we've only scratched the surface), then read on.

You may hope the things I've described won't come to pass. Maybe your friend or neighbor hopes they will. There's one big difference between you, however: while your neighbor can afford to watch and wait, **you can't**. There are some outstanding individuals in **Laurel Valley Watch** who together have done amazing work, but without your help it just won't be enough. The county right now is asleep at the wheel and, barring something unforeseen, will approve the rezoning. **Together we can be that something unforeseen.**

In essence, defeating this proposal has become a **political** matter. It's not political in the sense of Democrats/Republicans (**LVW**, for example, has plenty of both); rather, it's political in that it will require citizens who wish its defeat to overcome whatever obstacles they face (timidity, cynicism, lethargy, despair) to make their voices heard. Our elected officials work for us. We have to tell them loud and clear what we want.

Believe in yourself. Believe you can make a difference. And then contact all five of your county commissioners by phone and letter. Circulate this document among your friends. Educate yourself and others about what's going on — don't assume they know. Call **Laurel Valley Watch** at 689-2975. Support **LVW** financially (they've been paying a lawyer with \$20s and \$50s they scrape together at meetings and could use the money). Come to a meeting, learn, plan, and fight back. And don't wait — **do it now**.

And on the night of the commissioner's meeting (currently scheduled for sometime in March but subject to change), commit yourself to being in Marshall. **This is important.** There are about 20,000 of us in Madison County. **We need thousands of us around the courthouse and in the street the night this gets decided.** This will affect us all. Together, and only together, we have the power to protect our county, our home.

A Final Word

We tell our children the story of Paul Revere and the colonists because their love for home and their fight against tyranny was right and good. What we may not realize is that these stories never really end. We are writing our chapter now.

Once upon a time there was a county. The nickname of its high school team was the Patriots. They were well named for the people of this county loved their mountain home.

Then one day the people learned their home was in danger. Their county could be taken from them and never given back. The people of the county had to search deep inside themselves. They had to see if they knew what being Patriots really means...

**Contact Laurel Valley Watch at
1826 Watershed Road, Mars Hill, NC 28754
or call 689-2975.**