

Locals continue to fight against forced annexation

BY SARAH SHEW WILSON
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Property owners along the Midway Road corridor including Midway Trading Post owner Mike Richards are still a little stunned at their recent "victory" against St. James' annexation of their property, but Richards isn't giving up the fight to change state laws that allow forced annexation.

As part of a recent agreement with Oak Island, the town of St. James has agreed not to annex the 38 parcels in the Midway corridor they had requested to take in last year. Town officials said they didn't want the property; they just didn't want it to be developed haphazardly.

The agreement states that, in return for St. James not annexing the Midway property, Oak Island would agree not to annex—either voluntarily or involuntarily—properties along N.C. 211 the St. James developers own, the Arbor Creek subdivision and property across from the town entrance.

Richards said the nine months worth of fighting against the annexation were worth it, and now he's going to continue to fight the state laws that allow towns to involuntarily annex property, along with other activists across the state.

"Through this ordeal, I've met a lot of good people and made a lot of friends," Richards said recently. "We're going to continue to try to get changes in the statute."

He plans to attend the Annexation Reform 2010 Conference this weekend in Raleigh. The conference, organized by Stop N.C. Annexation is billed as an "educational conference/seminar on N.C. annexation law and reform."

"We're trying to gather steam for the General Assembly's short session," which begins in May, Richards said.

Members of the Shallotte Point Preservation Group (SPPG) are also planning to attend, group president Ronald Hobbs said this week.

"We've been keeping up-to-date with what's going on with annexation. We've been to most all of the meetings," Hobbs said.

The SPPG was formed after Shallotte Point residents learned of a bill in the state legislature that mapping out areas of possible annexation by the town of Shallotte. Local representatives later withdrew it after learning of residents' opposition.

The group has continued to advocate for bills in the General Assembly giving residents in unincorporated areas a voice in annexation matters.

Hobbs and other members have spoken at committee meetings on the issue.

State Rep. Frank Iler, R-Brunswick, said this week several annexation reform bills Republican legislators introduced stalled in committee during the last session. He said he plans to continue to put forward bills to change the laws making it more difficult to forcibly annex property.

Fighting against such bills is the N.C. League of Municipalities. League spokeswoman Margot Christiansen said this week the group is still trying to work toward a bill in the General Assembly that's "reasonable" to local municipal officials.

"The way it was left, a bill passed the House [last session] that was unacceptable to municipal officials because it had a referendum provision in it," Christiansen said.

That bill, HB 524, allows residents to vote on a proposed involuntary municipal annexation if a petition with signatures from 15 percent of the registered voters living in the city limits and in the area targeted for involuntary annexation is filed.

"The NCLM Government Affairs Team continues work on several fronts to address legitimate concerns while maintaining appropriate annexation authority," Christiansen wrote in a recent newsletter.

"We are discussing the issue with legislative leaders, as well as working hard to determine alternative solutions for concerned residents that do not restrict necessary municipal authority."

Richards and other members of the Midway "group," which formed in response to St. James' efforts, say they will also keep up with the annexation bills and continue to lobby for reform, even though their situation has been resolved.

That's one thing Richards said he's learned from his experience as a protestor and political activist.

"As a citizen, when you see wrong being done to a group of people, instead of saying, 'It ain't right' and feeling sorry for them, you should go to bat for them. Had I done that, I might not have gone through what I did," he said.

"Through all this agony and money spent, as bad as it was, some good came out of it...St. James residents have a government that is more responsible and accountable. If this nine months of turmoil helped, then it was worth it."

During that nine months, Richards and the other members posted protest signs along N.C. 211 denouncing St. James' actions, staged public protest rallies against forced annexation and spoke out at public hearings on the annexation ordinance. The group also filed suit asking the court to declare the annexation ordinance null and void after the town board adopted it.

"There are things we at Midway corner did that we didn't want to do, but it was never against the people of St. James. It was directed at their government," Richards said.

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