



Pittsboro protesters call for growth control

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BY KARA EIDE chh@heraldsun.com; 918-1035

PITTSBORO -- Infuriated by what they see as developers' infringement on Chatham County land, more than 300 protesters mobilized in front of the county courthouse in Pittsboro at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday to petition the county commissioners.

"Push 'em back!" the crowd cheered, in response to a call from protest leaders.

Cars circling the courthouse honked in support of the mass of people and signs demanding that residents "take back the county."

Protesters said they simply wanted the commissioners to be more proactive about controlling how the county grows rather than succumbing to all the demands from developers.

Among the sea of signs, a large tree figure, about 12 feet tall, boasted one that read: "Grow Slowly Like the Trees." Other characters holding signs at the rally included a protester in a squirrel costume and another in a blue jay costume.

Uniformed officers stood on the sidelines of the mostly angry gathering, which at 6 p.m. spilled into the county commissioners' board meeting in the courthouse.

When the number of people attending the meeting reached 295, the courtroom's maximum capacity, the fire marshal stopped others from entering the room. Protesters filled the benches, lined the walls and spilled out the doors in support of the protest leaders, who spoke during the public input session.

"I believe our democratic process of government is on trial," yelled Carrie Bolton, a pastor and resident. "Is this the way you choose to demonstrate to Chatham County residents the importance of their voices and the value of their hard work?"

While Bolton and four other residents begged the commissioners to be honest and respond to residents' demands, the sounds of rallying continued outside -- drums beating, horns tooting and people yelling.

At one point, during a speech by Patrick Barnes, the crowd in the courtroom went out of control, yelling, stomping and banging on the floors and benches. Commissioners Chairman Tommy Emerson tried to calm them down.

"We're going to follow the democratic process here!" he shouted, only to have a woman in the audience shout back, "Do you know what it means?" The crowd then whooped in support.

Emerson eventually regained order and all five speakers had their say, although each was cut off after reaching the three minutes allowed for each speaker.

Once the commissioners moved on to another topic, at about 6:50 p.m., more than half of the room's occupants filed out.

Downstairs and outside the courthouse, people continued to talk about their concerns.

Mary Bastin -- the rally's chief organizer and president of the watchdog group Chatham Citizens for Effective Communities -- and other local leaders met with the protesters.

Bastin said she hadn't expected such a turnout, but she was pleased to see so many show up. What she wants, she said, is for the commissioners to respond "immediately."

Specifically, the protesters want the board to adopt Draft A of the Compact Community Ordinance, a set of regulations they believe will ensure safe and gradual development for Chatham County.

The ordinance aims to address specific development issues such as design, buffering and wastewater management, as well as take into account affordable housing, schools and the economic effects on the community.

Also, they are pushing the board to reject Draft B, a revised version that the protesters said eliminates much of the value of the original draft, in some cases cutting whole sections.