

Bill Kirby Jr.: Promises made to Woodlake residents on June 28, 2018, were our promises to keep

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John Misiaszek was skeptical about this newspaper's invitation to Moore County residents, where they could gather with us on June 28 at Sandhills Community College and tell us about themselves and the county they call home.

Wary, he was, for sure.

"I read you're coming with several associates to Moore County to hear our stories," Misiaszek wrote in an email the day before. "I won't come over because I'd guess you're looking for upbeat stories, and unfortunately mine and those of my neighbors is a tale of woe. I live in the Woodlake community. As you know, Hurricane Matthew took out the dam that formed Woodlake. Since then, our home values have plummeted with no end in sight. By January 2019, the assessed values of our properties will have fallen by approximately \$86,000,000. Yes, mine and ours is a tale of woe."

And, Misiaszek would say he would not be coming to meet with Bob Gruber, our publisher; Matt Leclercq, our executive editor; Tim White, our opinion page editor; or any of us to include me.

"If anyone should be at the Sandhills Social meeting tomorrow, I would certainly encourage Woodlake residents," I sent back an email to Misiaszek. "I have not only read your email once, but twice. Further, I was cutting by Mary Pope's home at the convenience mart recently on my way to Cypress Presbyterian Church to visit my mother's grave, and was stunned when I looked at the original golf course that apparently has been scrapped and overrun with vegetation. Our newspaper, with Steve DeVane writing many of the stories about the dam since Hurricane Matthew, has followed this sad saga with numerous news accounts. I do not have a deaf ear to your plight, nor a blind eye. I feel your lament, and have seen it with my eyes. I would say that this, without question, is one of the big stories in Moore County. Tim White, our opinion page editor, is scheduled to be there, and he has a deep understanding of this. So will Lorry Williams, our senior news editor. And I can assure you that if you meet Matt Leclercq, our executive editor, your concerns will not fall on deaf ears, either."

Our executive editor would encourage Misiaszek, too.

"I agree with Bill 100 percent," Leclercq would write in an email. "This is exactly the reason why we're holding this 'meet-and-greet' in Moore County, so that we can hear first-hand from residents such as yourself about what you believe are the most important issues affecting you. The lake, certainly, would qualify as the most pressing issue for you and your neighbors. So I do hope you're able to stop by and chat with us."

John Misiaszek was there on that summer evening at the Dempsey Center, and along with him came many of his Woodlake neighbors to include Dave and Janice Dickerhoff, Lou and Beth Mason, Jim and Sue Wagner, Charlie and Linda Jones, Pam Jones and Frank Bauman. They told us about how first the Ellis Maples-designed golf course was closed by owners of the private country club, about how the hurricane wreaked such havoc on the dam and picturesque lake and about how the state ordered it drained in 2017 and finally the Arnold Palmer-designed course was shuttered by the Woodlake CC Corp., the German-based owner. And how they had pleaded with Moore County commissioners for help, and to no avail.

We promised to listen. We promised to follow the Woodlake story. And we have certainly done that this week in telling the story of how Sen. Tom McInnis and Rep. Jamie Boles and Rep. Allen McNeill, all who represent Moore County in the General Assembly, have introduced bills calling for county commissioners to issue bonds, with the country club homeowners and property owners paying via property tax assessments. And, we have given voice to county commissioners who give all the reasons why such a decision could be such an issue for the county.

The bills in the General Assembly are premature, county commissioners say, and they instead encourage Woodlake residents to continue pursuing becoming the county's 12th incorporated district along with Aberdeen, Cameron, Carthage, Foxfire, Pinebluff, Pinehurst, Robbins, Southern Pines, Taylortown, Whispering Pines and Vass.

"I could offer an equally sarcastic response," Charlie Jones, 75, a Woodlake resident, says about commissioners reasoning for not reaching out to bring an end to the issue. "But I won't, because I respect the position of Moore County commissioners, even though I don't agree with them. ... I'm guessing that the Moore County commissioners don't like a Cumberland County newspaperman getting in their business. I also think they see Sen. McInnis as a Richmond County guy; not a pure-bred Moore County person, thus some antipathy."

No, Mr. Jones, not just some newspaperman from Cumberland County. Fayetteville may be my home, but Moore County has my heart, from Vass where my mother grew up to Cypress Springs Presbyterian Church near Cameron, where she is buried and I will be, too. Or a walk down Broad Street in Southern Pines to a Sunday morning at Brownson Memorial Presbyterian Church with the white steeple and tall pines overlooking May Street.

We made a promise to folks from Woodlake and Moore County on that June 28 evening, and a promise made was our promise to keep.

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