

## **Results of Roads and Security Questionnaire, Summer, 2007**

Roads and Security Board Members, summer, 2007 – Don Armstrong, Bob Burns, Lewis Daniels, Tommy Greene, Henry Hancock, Mike Kaney, Carol Martin, Milton Ready, and Michael Whitt.

### **INTRODUCTION;**

In the spring of 2007, the Board of the Roads and Security Maintenance and Homeowner's Association (the Board) authorized one of its members, Milton Ready, to initiate a survey of all the property owners of Wolf Laurel. The thirteen questions for the questionnaire primarily originated from among Board members. A copy of the questionnaire along with the cover letter is attached. Mailings went out to approximately 1,150 property owners over a period of three weeks ending on 20 July. Four hundred and twenty-one responded, an astonishing return rate of 36.6 %. Statistically, the survey does represent the broader population of property owners. Clearly, property owners at Wolf Laurel feel both connected and passionate about this special place in the mountains of western North Carolina.

### **METHODOLOGY;**

Respondents were grouped into three categories, lot owners, homeowners, and those who owned both a home along with lots. Within each classification, questions further were clumped around those centering on roads, security, and the omega problem of assessments. In all cases, closely read written comments furnished not only additional information and clarification but also helpful comments and suggestions. They provide invaluable historical knowledge as well as a source of wisdom and counsel. In all, Wolf Laurel property owners mainly proved to be pragmatic and practical and not petty in their remarks, although an occasional aside insisted that additional monies would be approved only for a personal road or project. When a specific questionnaire is referenced or cited, its sequential number is given in parenthesis, i.e., (32)

Nonetheless, property owners manifested all the idiosyncratic, quirky, and indulgent qualities of a self-selected group as they answered the questions. Some chose to respond to three or four and ignore others while a few circled two or three answers to a single question. In some cases, respondents disregarded the assigned categories altogether and instead made up their own, choosing, for example, "fair," or "inconsistent" or "somewhat dissatisfied" as their own individual headings. In some instances, particularly on those regarding security, property

owners simply wrote “Doesn’t apply,” “Don’t know,” or “have had no reason to contact security,” and ignored the question altogether. From this, numbers proved asymmetrical, frequently not expressing an internal mathematical consistency.

The last question on assessments proved troublesome. Property owners not only often circled more than one answer but also sometimes did not even give any but a written response, instead choosing that method as a way of expressing their feelings. Of all the questions, it evoked the strongest emotions and most sobering counsel.

At least two of the questions begged an obvious and predictable answer and perhaps should have been rephrased or replaced. When asked about the conditions of roads, property owners, many from neatly manicured and paved developments in much flatter regions and who only occasionally visit Wolf Laurel, thought them deplorable and in need of much work. In similar fashion, when asked if they felt secure and safe in Wolf Laurel, a place far from a large city, almost immunized from crime and the problems of a post 9/11 world, most respondents seemed satisfied and even sanguine. Nonetheless, the questions themselves disclosed surprising concerns in both areas.

A word of caution should be given to anyone who looks at all 421 responses. Selective contextual readings would allow almost any “proof,” opinion, or viewpoint to emerge, all supported by seemingly irrefutable and anecdotal evidence. Yet the questionnaire inevitably has built into it residual contradictions, facile paradoxes, and inherent discrepancies. For example, the results would indicate that, in large part, the Board has succeeded in maintaining and securing Wolf Laurel, but that overall it never seems to do it well enough for property owners, especially with its allocated funds. The results of the survey, a report card for the summer of 2007, might look credible enough, but it nonetheless conceals serious unresolved and unacknowledged weaknesses and problems. It primarily should be considered as an assessment of the opinions of Wolf Laurel property owners in the summer of 2007 and not as a mandate or agenda for any particular group or person.

In like manner, the questionnaire and its results, even as a systematic survey and as statistically valid information, should not be used for a rigid reliance on numbers that would determine choices but, instead, as intelligence to help better inform difficult options. While such numbers assuredly are needed and invaluable, they do not provide a purely exact mathematical solution or rational model for Wolf Laurel’s current problems. For linear thinkers who hold dear binary frameworks and Cartesian certainty, this survey will not provide that resolution and clarification. For example, the thorniest problem of all, that of assessments, mathematically might look irresolvable and thus impossible while, in reality, it likely represents a condition or a

combination of contingencies that could be addressed by the Board. Many of the problems currently facing the Board simply are not easy to address and to study scientifically. A strict requirement for evidence before acting might mean that the Board would stop trying to resolve issues, cease evaluating, and quit applying their knowledge and expertise to current problems and concerns.

## **RESULTS:**

Perhaps the most beneficial outcome overall lay in the simple idea of communicating with property owners, of giving them a voice and, from that, some personal representation before the Board. Time and again, respondents thanked the Board for doing the survey, for listening to them, and for genuinely caring. One or two even remarked that, after the survey, they would travel to Wolf Laurel for the first time in years just to see what's happening. Several asked that the results as well as the surveys themselves be made public, an action that hopefully will be accomplished later this fall.

## **FULL AND PART-TIME RESIDENTS;**

Of all the homeowners who responded, perhaps 16.7 % lived in Wolf Laurel full time vs. 10 % of those who owned both homes and lots together, a significant statistic for those looking to expand services and who believe that more have chosen to reside at Wolf Laurel full time. They haven't.

In numbers, of the 286 respondents who either owned a home or else a home and lots together, only 42 or 15 % lived at Wolf Laurel full time. Still, a close reading of the information provided by part-timers might suggest that more are spending greater amounts of time, especially on weekends and holidays, on the mountain, and that they make more and extended trips to visit. In short, many choose to resort rather than reside at Wolf Laurel, albeit more often and for lengthier times than in the past, some frequently renting homes of others for their friends and relatives.

Yet crucial differences emerged between attitudes of part and full timers. Not surprisingly, the amount of time respondents devoted to Wolf Laurel directly influenced their attitudes towards the condition of roads and security. Among all property owners, the less time they spent on the mountain the more dissatisfied they seemed with the conditions of roads while the more contented they were with security. Lot owners, many of whom had remarks similar to "haven't been there since 2001" (392) or "Do not visit often" (267), wanted things like a community watch (121) and more information on "changes in ownership" that " will affect us,"

lamenting that they felt they were going to be made “step-children” (342) on the mountain. Nonetheless, many lot owners just wanted a closer connection to happenings here on the mountain. Among the three groups, lot owners had the least to say about Wolf Laurel and less interest in fully answering questions. Some even asked if any help could be given through the Board so that they could sell their lots.

## **ROADS:**

Q. 4. Overall, how would you rate your satisfaction with roads?

- A. Very satisfied - Lot owners – 8.77 %, homeowners, 7.6 %, home and lot owners, 10 %. Overall, 9.3 %.
- B. Satisfied – Lot owners, 65 %, homeowners, 64 %, home and lot owners.64.3 %. Overall, 64.43 %.
- C. Unsatisfied – Lot owners, 17.5 %, homeowners, 20.5 %, home and lot owners, 22.7 %. Overall, 21 %.
- D. Very unsatisfied – Lot owners, 8.77 %, homeowners, 7.6 %, home and lot owners, 1.9 %. Overall – 5.45 %.

Q. 5 – In the last year, has the conditions of the roads . . . improved?

- A. A. Yes – Lot owners, 24.4 %, homeowners, 53.13 %, home and lot owners, 54.3 %. Overall, 44.15 %.
- B. No – Lot owners, 4.4 %, homeowners, 10.9 %, home and lot owners, 12.2 %. Overall – 10.82 %.
- C. About the same – Lot owners, 64.4 %, homeowners, 36.6 %, home and lot owners, 36 %. Overall – 39.8 %.
- D. Worse – Lot owners, 6.6 %, homeowners, 6.6 %, home and lot owners, 1.3 %. Overall – 4.2 %.

Q. 6 – In the past year, has the response to roadway problems. . improved?

- A. A. Yes – Lot owners, 21.8 %, homeowners, 44.2 %, home and lot owners, 45 %. Overall – 41.33 %.
- B. No – Lot owners, 3.12 %, homeowners 10.9 %, home and lot owners, 7.85 %. Overall – 8.6 %.
- C. About the same – Lot owners. 75 %, homeowners, 42.9 %, home and lot owners, 43.6 %. Overall – 46.6 %.
- D. Worse – Lot owners, 0 %, homeowners, 3.9 %, home and lot owners, 3.57 %. Overall – 3.3 %.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR ROADS;**

Surely a place like Wolf Laurel not only has a surfeit of lawyers, professors, CEO's, accountants, and ex-military but also of engineers, contractors, builders, designers, and, in general, of experts and authorities on almost everything. On the suggestions question (7) of how to improve roads, respondents even laid out and sketched better ways to grade, drain, and slope roads, as well as landscape roadway banks and ditches (33, 43, 289, 166). A significant number, too many to list, suggested, begged, and pleaded for more but not all roads to be paved (10, 11, 19, 92, 94 . . . ). Nonetheless, a few determined property owners did not want any more paving, arguing that it would detract from the rusticity and modesty that sets Wolf Laurel apart from a place like Mountain Air (4, 31, 172, 181). One prudently asked the Board "to respect the limits of mountain living" and not try to do too much with nature.

The surveys consistently mentioned the roads on the mountain that needed more and improved attention, most often El Miner from Sarvis Lane to the entrance to the ski lodge, Lookout Drive, Buckeye, Glen Aire, Spring Valley, and Grouse Thicket. Several suggested that, in order selectively to pave what owners wanted, models like McKinney Gap, Painted Ridge, and Bald Mountain should be encouraged and even proportionally underwritten by the Board (24).

Perhaps the most comments about roads centered on their deterioration caused by heavy trucks (3, 39, 202, 202, 240, & 272 among many). Solutions ranged from charging more Architectural Review Board (ARB) fees for initial construction, then setting aside some for local and feeder roads where houses currently are being built and not just for general use, for insuring that all ARB fees are collected, charging Bald Mountain Development Corporation (BMDC) and other builders more for the damage done to roads during development, and assessing heavy gravel and other trucks a special annual fee for using Wolf Laurel's roads and giving them a designated sticker. Running throughout many surveys, owners asked that the Board do more planning for roads and not simply react to problems, "putting out fires," and that they publish a schedule of grading/rocking so that owners will know when "it's our turn."

Many suggestions seemed not only practical but commonsensical. One owner wondered if the Board could put up informational "signs at entrance to main roads showing visitors . . . tributary roads that connect, i.e., Buck House Road . . . to Zebulon, Bee Tree" and to others like Grouse Thicket (125, 125, and others). Several noted that some signs needed to be more accurate and carefully pointed. Many maintained that more road bond and less rock and gravel should be used. One wanted small, buried reflectors placed down the center lane

while another requested that owners not be allowed to park on the sides of roads but only at the bottoms of driveways during winter. Another asked that more mirrors, particularly at side roads, be installed. A very practical suggestion requested that, as in the past, the Board put out a clearly marked and bold map of Wolf Laurel and that guards be oriented as to the whereabouts of the roads and their conditions.

## **SECURITY;**

Q. 8 – Overall, how would you rate . . . security at Wolf Laurel?

- A. Very satisfied – Lot owners, 15.4 %, homeowners, 20 %, home and lot owners, 22 %. Overall – 20.2 %.
- B. Satisfied – Lot owners, 81 %, homeowners, 63,2 %, home and lot owners, 61 %. Overall – 64.8 %.
- C. Unsatisfied – Lot owners, 1.9 %, homeowners, 14.8 %, home and lot owners, 13 %. Overall – 12.2 %.
- D. Very unsatisfied – Lot owners, 1.9 %, homeowners, 1.9 % home and lot owners, 3.9 %. Overall – 2.8 %.

Q. 9 – In the past year, do you think that security . . . has improved?

- A. Yes – Lot owners, 6 %, homeowners, 11.89 %, home and lot owners, 21.2 %. Overall – 15.8 %.
- B. No – Lot owners, 3 %, homeowners, 9.85 %, home and lot owners, 12 %. Overall – 10.1 %.
- C. About the same – Lot owners, 48.5 %, homeowners, 74.8 %, home and lot owners, 63 %. Overall – 69.6 %.
- D. Worse – Lot owners, none, homeowners 3.5 %, home and lot owners, 4.0 %. Overall – 3.3 %.

Q. 10 – Has the response of security to problems . . . improved?

- A. Yes – Lot owners, 9.3 %, homeowners, 9.26 %, home and lot owners, 15 %. Overall – 11.8 %.
- B. No – Lot owners, 0 %, homeowners, 10.2 %, home and lot owners, 7 %. Overall – 7.5 %.
- C. About the same – Lot owners, 90.1 %, homeowners, 76.8 %, home and lot owners, 74 %. Overall – 77.5 %.
- D. Worse – Lot owners, 0 %, homeowners, 3.7 %, home and lot owners, 3.5 %. Overall, 3.2 %.

E. No opinion: 55.5 % of all respondents.

## **SECURITY;**

Although the vast majority of property owners at Wolf Laurel who answered the questions on security and who had opinions, perhaps 75 %, thought security to be “about the same” from last year while approximately 16 % thought it improved, some critical distinctions should be made in evaluating the responses. First, in question ten, asking about if “the response of security to problems in your area” had improved, a significant number, over 55 % of lot owners and 41 % overall, did not bother to reply, either ignoring the question altogether or else putting in “doesn’t apply” or “Cannot answer most of these questions” or “never had occasion to call.” Additionally, the written comments on question eleven; “Do you have any suggestions that might improve security at Wolf Laurel” elicited more comments than any other except that on assessments, a seeming disaffirmation of the overall feeling of security, safeness, and indifference. Poorly constructed and worded questions themselves lie at the heart of the inconsistency.

From this, while most owners felt Wolf Laurel to be a sanctuary and thus safe, they clearly separated the issues of security and enforcement of existing rules and covenants. In other words, they felt policing to be the chief weakness, and, from that, many of their thoughts and ideas centered on the lack of implementation of any enforcement authority.

The gate, the alpha and omega of security and for confidence in Wolf Laurel, came in for close scrutiny. One owner commented that “Fortunately, crime is very low at Wolf Laurel and lack of effective security has not become an issue . . . But (we) must have more control of who enters” and leaves (397). Over and again, owners appealed to the Board for better enforcement beginning at the gate, complaining of “lax guards” (372), some who could not “separate themselves from their chairs” and who simply waved everyone through. One asserted that security personnel were “PR folks, gofers . . .with the appearance of making us feel secure” (27) while another maintained that the “Madison County sheriff seems to be the only ‘security’ overall (39). Many pleaded with the Board to keep strict records of all visitors and workers who entered (13, 22, 28, 52, 91, 94, 99, 105, 209, 303, and at least a score of others), and asked that any guard who did not follow current rules and procedures be terminated. One believed that security personnel at Wolf Laurel simply “did not care” (240) while another asked that the name of the guard on duty be publicly posted on a board for all to see. Several wanted more training, better pay, and closer supervision. One commented that the gate “did not matter if you let the

barbarians in" (30). Poor lighting at the gate and immediately inside at the village worried some (145, 175).

Lapsed security stickers and their lack of enforcement rankled many (32, 182, 304) while many property owners called for a less labor intensive "electronic entry system" of "bar codes" (1, 91, 105, 277, 309, 378, and others). Several wanted a decal for workers at Wolf Laurel as well as their check-in and out, some asking that driver's licenses be taken until they left the gate. Some maintained that workers frequently could be seen driving around on Sundays and in the evenings (35, 39, 343, 379). In similar fashion, skiers driving around after they entered the gate worried some, and two or three asked that they not be allowed through the main gate but instead routed to the ski slopes outside Wolf Laurel (6).

The issue of Harbor Oaks School, variously referred to as the "school for boys" and just "the boarding school" worried many. Summed up, owners, some of whom had only seen boys lounging around the old Wolf Laurel Inn and did not know of the Board's discussions on the School, asked why they were there while one maintained, "it was inappropriate to have property" in a gated community "used for a boarding school." Another believed that property values on "Spring Valley will deteriorate as well as our resort community reputation" and all asked the Board either for advice or action (1, 3, 86, 135, 144, 193, 366, anon. written comments, and others).

Not surprisingly, a substantial number appealed to the Board simply to enforce its own covenants, agreements, and commitments to the property owners of Wolf Laurel. Speeding trucks especially worried many, often peppered with comments like "Contractors drive too fast" making the "roads dangerous" for everyone (65, 90, 101, 4, 233, 236, 179, 236, 233, 289, 258, 379, 301, 360, and several others). No survey mentioned speeding SUVs or other vehicles as a concern. Some homeowners wanted speeders fined (4) while another requested that speed limits generally be enforced (236). One suggested that heavy trucks specifically be restricted to a limit of 15 mph on all roads, especially graveled ones, inasmuch as they caused significant damage to the roadways (233). Lastly, several homeowners called upon the Board to prohibit trucks with "bad and loud" mufflers from entering Wolf Laurel as well as the use of "Jake brakes" (185, 344, 301, 360). Several pointed to the fact that such trucks constituted a noise nuisance, and, as such, should be banned by current covenants.

In like manner, a surprising number seemed upset by more and more light pollution at Wolf Laurel. All asked the Board to enforce its own rules and to insure that particularly bright and intrusive lights are turned off or else masked (8, 13, 28, 31, 105, 226, and others). Fireworks, usually centered on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration, and barking dogs after 9 pm (6, 138,

140), upset some owners. Noisy parties, especially over the holidays and “behind the villas at the cottages” irritated some (12).

Not uncommonly among respondents, they offered a solution to this and several other concerns. Why not, they queried, have a roving security guard, even seasonally hire an extra person, particularly on weekends, during evenings, and at peak periods during the summer? Several noted that roving security had been suggested and approved both by the Board and also by Long Range Planning committees but never implemented. One owner indicated that such a roving security guard, properly identified as such, could not only enforce exiting ordinances like speeding, noise, and light pollution but also “check tree-cutting permits and complaints by residents.” All wanted a person trained in police work and also in CPR. (43, 153, 156, 132, 139, 347).

### **ASSESSMENTS:**

Q. 13. Would you be willing to support an increased assessment or a one-time assessment to implement any specific and significant changes in roads and security?

- A. Yes – Lot owners, 9.5 %, homeowners, 15.8 %, home and lot owners, 19.5 %.  
Overall - 16.36 %.
- B. No – Lot owners, 68 %, homeowners, 40.5 %, home and lot owners, 35.9 %.  
Overall – 43.1 %.
- C. One-time assessment only – Lot owners, 7.9 %, homeowners, 9.5 %, home and lot owners, 8.5 %. Overall - 8.5 %.
- D. Both – Lot owners, 0 %, homeowners, 1.9 %, home and lot owners, 8.3 %.  
Overall – 4.4 %.
- E. Yes, with conditions – Lot owners, 14.3 %, homeowners, 32.2 %, home and lot owners, 26.6 %. Overall – 27.3 %.

### **CONCLUSIONS ON ASSESSMENTS;**

It is a maxim of political theory that the legitimacy of any governing body lies in its ability to levy and collect taxes and in the willingness of citizens to pay them. Governments often fail and dissatisfaction and disaffection occur over taxes more than any other single issue. Anyone who objectively examines the responses from Wolf Laurel property owners on the question of assessments surely must conclude that the Board has much work to do to re-establish its

credibility and trustworthiness as a governing body. Some had lingering suspicions, even bitter resentment, of the Board after its last “illegal” attempt at an increased assessment, pointing out that they “didn’t like how votes were counted in the last assessment” and wondering if it would be forced upon them again (13, 56, 65, 176)). A full 43 % simply answered no, and, in so doing, gave the Board a lesson in its own past history and conduct. One or two requested that the Board look into either declaring Wolf Laurel to be a special tax district or else incorporating it as a small town as a solution to its many problems.

Nonetheless, an unexpected 44 % would allow increased assessments but only with conditions that make the Board accountable in terms of its plans and their approval by owners. The ideas of a one-time assessment only and also a one-time assessment coupled with a general increase should be dismissed inasmuch as they have little or insignificant support.

The key to any notion of an increased assessment lies in the Board’s own willingness to look at the current flat-rate method of assessing all lots and homes as if they were equal, at its lack of enforcement of its own collection policies, and in a pervasive belief by some homeowners that the Board’s conduct in dispensing and collecting funds in the past has been driven more by “inter-personal relationships” and as a “good ol’ boys club” than by an overall concept of fairness, professionalism, and equity (127, 277).

More specifically, Wolf Laurel property owners wanted the Board, in the broadest sense, to be more accountable in terms of its funds and conduct. Over and again, property owners indicated they might consider an assessment “if a CPA audit showed good reason” and also a “need to be sure R & S is collecting all fees,” especially appropriate costs from large developers and users like BMDC and the ski slope (39). Some maintained that lodge and condo owners already paid “more than their fair share” while others wondered why, if community groups went in together to fund paving and needed repairs, the Board should not give them a proportional break for a period of two to three years (98). Too many called for a policy of “rigorously collecting past-due assessments,” “better management of funds” and pleaded with the Board for “accurate and current records” and even “a P and L statement.” (50, 73, 76, 304 and others). “Typically,” one homeowner maintained, “assessments only benefit a few.” (62).

Almost all the conditions for an increased assessment called for the Board to “Explain significant changes” that would “address specific needs.” Clearly, homeowners would like “a description of projects needed” and some planning, perhaps a three to five year blueprint or plan of action with projected costs, that would “have a positive impact” and not perpetuate present policies (5, 8, 12, 76 78). Several asked for a coherent budget planning process and some explanation instead of just general categories (76). Running throughout the surveys,

those who would vote for an increased assessment wanted final approval given by homeowners and not the Board, a clear barometer of distrust and wariness of the Board's actions.

Nonetheless, it appears that, with appropriate planning, budgeting, and communication, the Board likely would be successful in increasing assessments over the next several years. One homeowner even suggested an amount of \$100 a year for five years but only with many of the conditions delineated above.

### **GENERAL COMMENTS:**

Several remarks did not touch upon either roads or security or maintenance issues but, instead, pointed to some of the Board's inadequacies as a homeowner's association. While several responses congratulated the Board for beautiful landscaping along the entrance and Wolf Laurel road, more asked why not put in native plants, wildflowers, and grasses, almost all perennials, and encourage others to do the same along other roadways. An almost nostalgic inclination among homeowners wanted to keep the mountain as green and as natural as possible, reminding the Board that Wolf Laurel should not be "citized" or "prettified" (32). Many pleaded with the Board to preserve and protect green spaces between properties and also to keep a low density plan of development, a key to Wolf Laurel's rusticity and character (4, 182, 231 365). A significant few wanted an improved nature trail, expanded hiking and walking paths, and control of amenities for future use (195. 299). Several asked the Board to "be careful of roadside trimming of native plants, especially in springtime" (231).

Others pointed to the loss of an overall feeling of community and to divisiveness on the mountain, wondering why the Board did not extend itself to other organizations in a spirit of cooperation and combined effort (121, 153, 277). One asked for an abdication of the "annual controversies" that have plagued Wolf Laurel for years (372). Several offered and volunteered their time to help in any of these efforts, including one lady who indicated she was the vice-president of a 120-member condo/lodge/villa association (172, 383). Two or three asked that the Board promote better mail box locations and also encourage groups to landscape around them (182).

Lastly, some wondered about emerging relationships between Wolf laurel property owners and current owners of BMDC, noting that they would like a "developer who cared" while another wanted "improved communications...regarding emerging relationships between Wolf Laurel and the Preserve" (311. 299, 280). Some wanted the Board to meet at different times, especially during the summer, suggesting evenings and Saturday mornings for those who

worked or only came on weekends. More would like to be involved, a clear indication by the overwhelming number of responses to the questionnaire.

## **CONCLUSIONS;**

First, the Board needs to re-establish three of the most basic conditions for its legitimacy or else risk becoming an anachronism, namely, communication, service, and openness to both its finances and affairs as a whole. As a Board, we need to remember that, to paraphrase Theodore Roszak, it is not an undermining of progress or a subversion of the rights of others to assert the common-sense principle that, as a community, Wolf Laurel exists primarily for the health and enjoyment of those who live in it and not for the convenience of those who drive through it, not for the pleasure of those who scenically fly over it, not for the benefit of those who build and maintain its structures, and not for those who exploit its real estate for profit and “bottom lines.”

Finally, the problems facing the Board reflect the changing nature of a new century and also of a developing community here on the mountain. They do not appear insuperable or overwhelming, assuredly not in comparison to those faced by the first mountaineers centuries ago. The epigraph for this report might be found in Joseph de Maistre’s parable of the senator:

THE SENATOR; “This is an abyss into which it is better not to look.” THE CITIZEN;  
“My friend, we are not free not to look.”