

The “Broken Bridge” has added a certain “je ne sais quoi” to island living. The event, described as “cataclysmic” by Governor Sanford, who choppered in to say something three and a half days after it happened (because someone told him they thought he ought to do that) and, whose performance in this situation gives complete credence to his campaign promise of as little government as possible (or something like that), has now become an everyday part of our lives. People check the webcams, leave a little earlier, fine tune their travel to avoid the worst of times and are “muddling through”.



Still (and not that we needed another reason for such reflection) one wonders when the “smart growth” some of our politicians are trumpeting is going to begin. If every house planned for Lady’s Island (both on paper and in developers’ heads) materializes, our current traffic situation will become a warm and fond memory.

But it goes beyond that and here’s the hard part: There’s no lack of opinion; it’s in letters to the Editor, in columns like this, even in brochures and handout materials from some pretty smart people who run some pretty smart organizations which have some pretty smart ideas about how to grow sensibly here. The thing is, stating opinions is just not enough, No, the missing link, so far, is participation and I’m as guilty of being absent as anyone else.

Our turnouts on Election Day would suggest that we are a people so confident in our republic and its democratic principles that there’s no longer any need to exercise our obligations and responsibilities. Just over 15% of eligible voters bothered to cast ballots in the Ceips/Newton Republican primary runoff election days ago. That means that the 85% of us who did not show up have no permission to carp, complain or wax poetic about Ms.Ceips or her strengths, weaknesses, capabilities or lack thereof. We did not care enough to participate and that gives us less credibility to opine.

Such behavior has its ripple effect on our elected officials. They see this apathy and use it to their advantage. Little city councils make big decisions with virtually no public consultation because public participation is almost non-existent and often, public outcry, as was proven at some local city council meetings last autumn, can be shoved aside with a simple reference to the “rules.” So, 600 people standing together on the council steps to stop a certain annexation from proceeding could not accomplish it.

Counties set density limits. Here’s a précis of a pre-election interview that Weston Newton gave to the Island Packet. He told this story: Beaufort County set a one house on every three acres density for a certain tract on 170. A developer then “suggested” to the Council that unless that’s changed to three houses on each acre, he will go to one of the adjoining towns, get the tract annexed and build even higher density.

That’s the Bluffton model. Local councils pitted against County Councils, people promising more than they should, setbacks shortened, easements given; trading tradition for more tax dollars, making new old villages that look like caricatures. Heck, there’s a section of highway 278 where the Auto Mall’s on one side and the new O.C. Welch is on the other. Beauty is, of course, in the eye of the beholder, but something tells me that piece of highway is not going to get any awards for beauty.

This space has been devoted more than once to a discussion of how we might be able to influence development in the place we love. There are developers with vision who look at our area and want to build things that fit in; that don’t harm the estuary; that take into account the history and folkways of the region. There are also landowners with vision who act responsibly

and cooperate with land trusts to try, whenever they can, to protect what we want to protect while not giving up their rights to profit from their holdings and/or the risks they have taken over the years.

There are also developers who couldn't care less about any of that and, to quote Gordon Gekko of movie fame, just say "don't tell me what's right or wrong; just tell me what the rules are."

Concern for how things grow around here must move out of the Op Ed and Letters to the Editors' sections and into the political arena. The people we recently elected to County Council need to start telling us exactly what they mean by "smart growth". The people who seek to be elected need to know that more than 15% of us care about what's happening. The local press needs to get aggressive and ask candidates tough questions.

The time is getting very near when it will be too late to have these discussions. It's time to understand that infrastructure should not be nipping at the heels of population growth (the sad norm around here); but that the type of growth we want for ourselves, as communities and a society, should determine what we build.

We have not been helping our leaders understand this and we should not be surprised if they read our disinterest as a blank check.