

Community Update – Bladen Bridge Naming Controversy

Over the past several days there has been much discussion over the issue of naming a bridge in Bladen County to honor fallen firefighter Ron Allen of Tar Heel. There are many aspects of this subject that need to be explained and clarified, and that is the reason for this essay.

First of all, there are many state laws, rules, and guidelines that govern this decision in accordance with North Carolina General Statute 136-18. County commissioners do not have the authority to endow this honor, but a unanimous resolution by the full board can be considered by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) Board when a request such as this is made. In addition, the support of the citizens of the county is a deciding factor in the approval of the action by the NCDOT State Board. Simply put, if the request does not have the unanimous support of the community it will not receive approval from the NCDOT.

Bladen County has recently seen the results of an effort to name a bridge in honor of one resident fail. In 2020 a small group of Bladen County residents asked the Bladen County Board of Commissioners to support naming a bridge in Elizabethtown in honor of the late J.C. Bachelor, a civic leader and beloved member of the community. The board of commissioners unanimously approved a resolution in support of the naming, although there had been no public discussions about the consideration of the resolution and naming.

Once the resolution had been passed by the commissioners and publicized in local media outlets, resistance to the naming of the bridge arose, with several county residents contacting the NCDOT to express their opposition. The NCDOT refused to act on the request, and the entire situation resulted in needless anger and hurt feelings that are still not fully healed.

Since the subject of naming the bridge to honor Mr. Allen has become more widely known throughout the county, members of the board of commissioners have been contacted by citizens who support the honor as well as some who oppose it in its current form. Many residents have asked questions that need to be answered and submitted information that needs to be verified and considered before making a decision.

The most common of the questions and comments refer to other public servants who have lost their lives while in service to Bladen County, yet have received no similar honor. Several citizens commented that they would like to see other local heroes honored in the same way. Local residents have mentioned three particular examples of first responders as deserving to be honored as well, and there are possibly others who deserve the same recognition.

Those cited by callers include David Hunsinger Jr., who died in 2011 in a motor vehicle accident while responding to a call. He was 23 years old and had served in the Tar Heel Volunteer Fire Department for six years when he died, leaving behind a wife and two young children. His father is Chief of the fire department.

John M. Hall was Deputy Chief of the Clarkton Fire Department when he died in 2012. He was 48 years old and had served as a volunteer in three different Bladen County fire departments for 21 years. Deputy Chief Hall died after suffering a heart attack while answering a call for help.

In January of 2019, James Smith was serving with the Bladen County Sheriff's Department on active duty supervising inmates when he suffered a stroke and lost consciousness. Inmates called for help and tried to save him, but he died in the hospital.

The small community of Tar Heel has sadly lost two young men who gave their lives in service to their communities, leaving behind wives and children. It is difficult to explain a decision to honor one but not the other.

Some residents have questioned the location of the proposed honor, suggesting that it should be located in the fire district where the fallen hero served, and asking what if a tragedy happens to another firefighter who lives in the district where the bridge is located. Others have asked if the fire department members where the bridge is located support the naming, and if other fire departments in the county have been consulted about the decision.

All of these surrounding questions and issues need to be investigated, answered, and resolved to insure that the entire county is unified in support of the naming of this bridge, because if they are not the effort to bestow this honor will not only fail, it will result in even more strife and division among county residents than that which this issue has already generated.

As members of the Bladen County Board of Commissioners, it is our duty to look at all sides of an issue and listen to the concerns of all residents of our county. This is a responsibility we take seriously, and to do anything less would be both a disservice to the people we were elected to represent and a violation of the oath of office we took when sworn into office.

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