

## Outsiders, Fences and Lake County

August 28, 2006

I was walking down to get the mail the other day when Lake County's own Original Citizen happened by in his pickup, and stopped to chat. Spew is more accurate. O.C. is typical of many who live around here: he's very even tempered. He's mad all the time. It's never a question of whether or not he's mad, it just a question of what he happens to be mad about.

This time, he was raving about the County Commissioners, and their lackeys, the Zoning Office. This time their malfeasance was straightforward – they had the unmitigated gall to grant a building permit to someone who had purchased the 40 acre parcel adjacent to the one his hunting shack was on. “I went to that public meeting and told those {expletive deleted} that I didn't want anyone building next to me. I told them I'd been hunting and walking on that particular piece of ground since I was a kid. And those damn (really bad expletive deleted) went ahead and gave out a permit anyway!!” O.C. thought that his objection should have been sufficient grounds to deny the permit request. To add insult to injury the individuals who had received the permit were the lowest sort of life form in his world: they had a 651 area code.

“It's about time we build a fence around this entire county and keep the riffraff out of here. They're building a fence down in Mexico – if it will work there, it should work here. I say if you don't own land now in Lake County, it's too bad, you can't buy, build or move here!” He wanted to know if I'd sign a petition that he could take to the County Board proposing such an action. I told him I could support his fence proposal only on one condition: that it would be a *wooden* fence. “I don't care what we build it out of” O.C. replied “glad to know you're on my side of this”. He drove off still mad. At least he wasn't mad at me.

Last year, the population of Minnesota grew by about 85,000 people. To put it another way, we added a city the size of Duluth last year to our state. The same thing will happen this year, and the same next year. 85,000 people a year and growing – people who need houses, jobs, roads, hospitals, grocery stores, gas stations, libraries, hunting camps ... it goes on and on. Most of those people will settle in the Metro area, but Lake County will get its share. Some who come up here will come as they flee the growth of the Metro area, some will come here directly. Bottom line is, we'll get our share of new folks. Some will settle here while some will come to have vacation homes, be they “starter castles” on the Shore, or deer shacks in the woods.

There is no doubt that we have a quality of life and a general atmosphere here that is appealing. It's why some folks born and raised here never leave, and why some of us come back. It's why people want to vacation up here, and when they do, why the idea of having their own little slice of the area becomes so desirable. There is an underlying

irony – the more folks come up here and the more it grows, the less it remains the quaint community and quiet area that is so appealing. Our local culture carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

So, we grapple with the question of how to keep what we have here, and not let it be destroyed. Yet we will get nowhere until we understand that growth is not just coming, it's here already. To hope we can avoid it, or that it will somehow bypass us, is just a pipedream. We will be better off to know that the growth is here, and work with it, rather than vilify those who come into our community.

When it came to logging and land use, Don Ferguson (long-time Lake County resident) was fond of observing that “everyone is an environmentalist until it's their ox being gored.” The Lake County Corollary states “no one is opposed to building and development until after they've bought their own place”. It's always easy to be against something: against growth, against development, against the government, against people with 651 area codes. It's always easy to be mad when you're against something. It is much harder to be for something and to be positive about it.

Which, I guess, is why O.C. is still out collecting signatures for his petition.

*Greg Hull is a sawyer and philosopher-at-large. He owns and operates Hull's Sawmill, and is willing to submit a bid for a wooden fence to the Lake County Board.*