Scenes from a poverty tour – Part 3

This is the third in a series of columns on poverty, inspired by a recent North Carolina NAACP-sponsored tour of high-poverty regions of our state.

Big City

BY KIRK ROSS

The poverty line is just a measure, another number in an array of what Gene Nichol, director of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, refers to as "bloodless statistics."

Once again for the record, congress set the 2011 poverty level at $22,314 for a family of four. It's a flat rate across the country and doesn't take into account differences in the cost of living from place to place.

Last August, the North Carolina Justice Center released a study establishing a Living Income Standard – what it really costs to keep a household going, taking into account things the federal poverty level, which focuses on the basics, does not. The report breaks down costs in each county in the state for housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, payroll and income taxes and necessities like phone service, clothing and school supplies.

Here in Orange County, high child-care and housing costs push us into the top tier with a Living Income Standard of $55,468 for a family with two adults and two kids. The statewide average for that same family was estimated at $48,814.

But you can't do poverty by the numbers. Numbers don't tell what it takes to survive or what it means to grow up in areas wracked by generations of sustained poverty. You hear someone like Bunny Saunders, mayor of the little Washington County town of Roper, say that about a third of those in the area live below the poverty line, or listen to a county director of social services talk about managing less state support in a place where the number of food stamp recipients has all but doubled in three years, and you can't help but wonder how it is that so many thousands of people can get by on so little.

Meanwhile, opportunities for work in a place where they have almost always been in short supply are dwindling, especially outside the larger towns.

Residents from Roper and Winton, way up in northern Hertford County, talked about the departure of manufacturing, how the small textile shops had disappeared and how agriculture turned to agribusiness and shut out the small family farmer. Now most of what jobs exist are an expensive commute away across the border in Virginia. These are the places where the challenges of poverty are the greatest, not because those in poverty here in Orange County are any less affected, but because the routes out of poverty there are far fewer and much more difficult to navigate.

We can preach education, but the young people in Roper and Winton know that even if they get into Carolina or some other fine college, they won't find sufficient work upon returning home. We've talked for years about distance education and rural broadband, but in the very places where they could have the greatest impact, too many homes and classrooms remain unconnected.

Of course, the biggest roadblock of all is indifference from the rest of us.

As you may have heard, the unemployment rate dropped last month. The bloodless numbers on the economy will probably continue to get rosier as we head toward November's election. That would be welcome news of course, but unless something changes, the recovery in this state will be felt least in the places that need it the most. My fear is that as things get more comfortable here in the Triangle, we'll forget about the small towns and crossroad communities to our east and repeat the mistake of again accepting levels of poverty there as unchangeable.

At each stop we made on the tour, NAACP president Rev. William Barber would talk about the awful blindness we have when it comes to poverty, that we're able to accept it, in part because we can't put a face to it.

He'd close each sermon with a certain Franciscan blessing, the one calling on God to bless us with discomfort at easy answers and half-truths, anger at injustice and oppression and tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection and starvation.

The last line goes like this: "May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done."

Amen.

A town we can all live in

BY JACK HAGGERTY

This is the final installment in a three-part series about Carrboro development.

There can only be a few people who don't approach the land-use approval process with trepidation. Sellers will tell you that potential buyers flee when told the town must approve the proposed use for the property; developers and professionals grow weak and anxious as they contemplate the process; and it is generally agreed, if not spoken, that children should never be exposed to it. I've been through the process quite a number of times. I've been elated, staggered, baffled and dismayed, sometimes all in the same meeting, by what has gone on in Room 101 at Carrboro Town Hall. Why is this so?

I'm all for development and the town being "open for business," as one of the alderman put it, and all of us have a job in this business. The board of aldermen should show constancy to the community vision, consistency in their findings and fairness in their dealings with applicants. The citizens have the duty of attention. The board approves or disapproves a project in the name of the citizens – the board members are not backroom oligarchs, cutting deals away from the public. The greatest attraction of local government is its immediacy; the citizens' voices should be heard, frequently, and not only at elections. The applicants must approach the process with openness and a willingness to engage the community.

Typically the members of the board of aldermen are not experts in town planning or civil engineering, and that's why there's a town staff. They supply the competence the board lacks, and the staff's reports and recommendations to the board are a professional review of the project's compliance with the land-use ordinance. The staff's review also includes the policies and plans the community has adopted and how the project furthers these or not. The town staff does not represent a particular neighborhood or a particular constituency; their reports capture the interests of the whole town.

The applicant should make the argument for contested issues first to the staff. The board, in its judgments, should rely on the staff recommendations and should not dismiss a staff recommendation or report out of hand unless a member is able to show error or inaccuracy in the report. When a board member moves contrary to town staff recommendations, the public should pay attention. Too often we only learn of an alderman's contrary position after a vote, when it's too late. An alderman shouldn't take it upon himself or herself to represent some phantom, absent or silent constituency.

In the end, passive citizens only have themselves to look to if they don't like a built project. Parts of the approval process, though, can stand for improvement, and notification is one of them. The mailings and advertisements in the papers shouldn't be in zoning-ese and land-use speak. These notices shouldn't be alarmist, but they should be informative enough so that the average citizen can grasp what is being proposed in a development. The presentation of the concept plan should be heavily advertised and should include images of the project. A simple schematic map showing the location of the project is always helpful. Town meetings are public, and there are, too often, too few attendees. If a citizen group doesn't like what they're seeing, the group should resort to the protest petition, which forces the requirement of a super majority, not a simple majority of the board's votes.

It's a chore keeping up with all of the projects under review. The town could place the plans and images of the project on the walls at Town Hall or the Carrboro Century Center, including concept plans. That would make the material easily available. The material is often online, but the images and plans are in unwieldy pdfs, with the plans and images buried in many pages of technical material. The applicant would supply the images to be shown in the gallery and a brief narrative; the town would provide the wall space. The development gallery could show projects currently in the review process and those approved but not yet built. A couple of clipboards could collect any comments, and the town could use the projects to market itself to potential applicants.

Early in the approval process the applicant should be listening to the town staff and the citizens. By doing so the applicant gets a clear sense of what the board is likely to find in its review and how the neighbors will react to the project. All of this should happen before there is a lot of expense and commitment to a particular scheme on the part of the applicant. Applicants should be willing to explore options and not simply put forward a plan with a take-it-or leave-it attitude. Often applicants make assertions about alternatives that have no grounding, and the board gives them a pass. We've had our share of that. Aldermen should not prefer an applicant's unfounded assertion to a report made by town staff. There should be steady communication between staff, elected officials, advisory boards, citizens and the applicant. I don't think there should be surprises in the final meeting. The closer the project gets to the hearing, the closer it should be to fulfilling all of the parties' expectations. Everybody gives, everybody takes.

High-volume retail, multifamily housing and a downtown dense with retail and office space will all work in Carrboro. Being open for business means there is a general order and predictability in the process. These qualities comport with being open for business. It is a process we can all live with, and it will result in a town we can all live in.

Jack Haggerty is an architect who lives in downtown Carrboro.