



VIEWPOINT

Matthews-CMS spat is not about race

BY JOHN HIGDON - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER EDITORIAL BOARD

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Matthews is a town I am proud to serve, but being a town commissioner occasionally offers a front row seat to fireworks. The latest came in a contentious 4-3 vote Monday evening regarding the inclusion of HB514 in our legislative agenda, which is a list of things the town deems important and intends to ask our state representatives to support. Rep. Bill Brawley, R-Mecklenburg, sponsored the bill that would give select localities (currently just Matthews and Mint Hill) the ability to operate municipal charter schools, but it does not obligate us to do.

I did not support the bill's inclusion in our legislative agenda for a number of reasons. It does not engender collaboration with the Charlotte Mecklenburg school board, which may now take retaliatory measures. It has not been proven to be fiscally or functionally viable if schools were

constructed, or even been vetted by our community at large. Public support for the bill prior to our vote was almost non-existent, but dissension rife. This legislation is being rushed through at the 11th hour with insufficient consideration given to the concerns of all stakeholders. In Matthews we live and die by the consensus process. Let us hope any negative consequences can be mitigated.

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HB 514 creates another concern I find most troubling of all: the portrayal of the dispute as being about racial prejudice. When asked by a CMS board member at a March 20 meeting why we were insistent that Matthews children attend Matthews schools, I responded by saying in part that our kids were proud of their hometown. The Observer's headline on the story was "Matthews schools for Matthews kids: Town pride or race prejudice?" Even the most casual reader knew the title was aimed squarely at my comment and not a take on a Jane Austen novel.

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To be clear, I have no desire to push for the return to Matthews of children from nearby schools in other municipalities (Bain Elementary, Providence High School, for example), nor do I advocate students from other municipalities leave schools located here. My point was that Matthews children want to go to schools proximate to their homes, period. I think this is true for children regardless of where they live. There was nothing racially motivated or prejudicial in my comment. Although I disagree with the vote of some of my colleagues on the town board, I likewise do not believe their support of the bill has anything to do with race. It's all about our kids going to schools near their homes and not being under the constant threat of reassignment.

I just do not see HB 514 as a sound means to this end, because the unfortunate fact is that if Matthews ever does engage the municipal charter option allowed by the bill, the schools created would be much less diversely populated than our current CMS schools. I do not think this is a desirable outcome. Developing an understanding of those different from us is best learned at an early age. There is no better place to learn these lessons than in school.

Whether HB 514 becomes law or dies in the state Senate, I am hopeful our community, Matthews elected leaders and the CMS board can work together for the best possible outcomes for our children. That is what is important.

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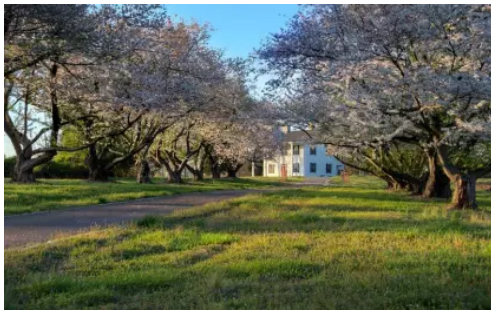




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