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FEATURED

## Foxfire Withdraws from Transportation Planning Group

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Mar 20, 2024



Members of the SMPO discuss Foxfire's withdrawal from the group. ANA RISANO / The Pilot

The regional transportation planning group is now one municipality smaller after Foxfire withdrew this past week because no village representative wanted to comply with financial reporting requirements.

The village, west of Pinehurst, will still have its population represented by Moore County, which has a seat on the board.

Village of Foxfire representatives were not comfortable filing a “Statement of Economic Interest,” which is required to sit on the governing board. Foxfire Mayor Janice Gregorich called it an “intrusive” process.

The required document essentially deals with ethics, asking each member to disclose any investments that could create a conflict of interest when discussing projects.

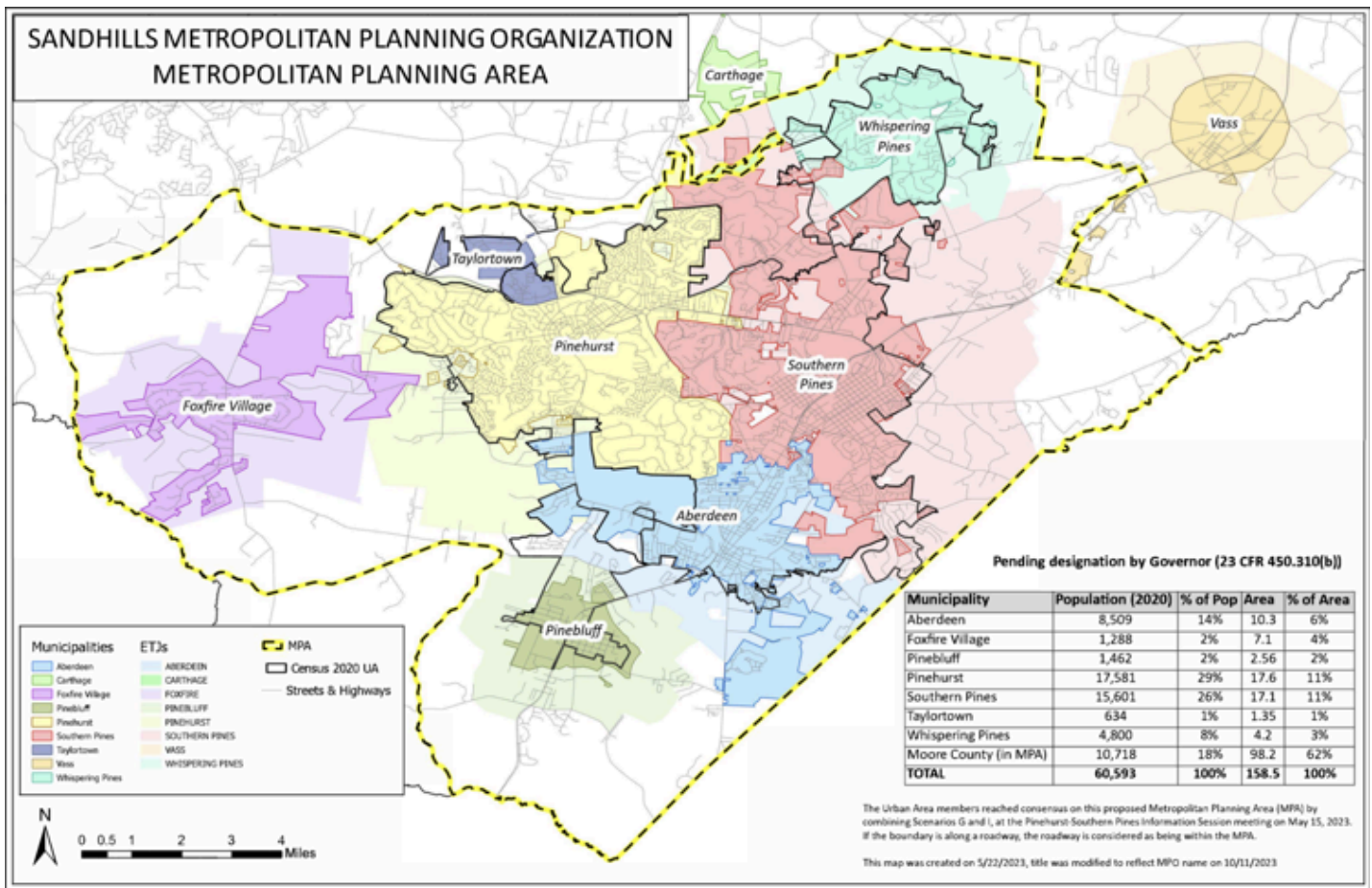
“It seemed extremely intrusive and especially since our vote was very minor,” Gregorich said.

The form requires individuals to fill out things such as real estate holdings, ticker symbols of any stocks owned, inclusion in trusts, roles in any public companies, creditors of any debt owed and sources and types of income. Specific amounts and accounts are not required to be disclosed.

The Sandhills Metropolitan Planning Organization, or SMPO, took nearly a year to form after part of Moore County was identified by federal census figures to form a MPO because its population surpassed 50,000.

The group included representatives from Pinehurst, Southern Pines, Aberdeen Pinebluff, Taylortown, Whispering Pines, Foxfire and parts of unincorporated land controlled by Moore County.

With Foxfire out, the representatives discussed whether or not they should redraw the metropolitan area or leave the mapped out area as is and Moore County to represent Foxfire’s population.



The proposed planning area. (Courtesy of Scott Walston)

The group preferred the latter, not wanting to reopen the debate on which areas of Moore County should be represented by the SMPO.

SMPO Chairwoman and Southern Pines Mayor Taylor Clement said, “I think it gives Foxfire more local representation and the ability, if they wanted to rejoin,” to be voted back in.

The change created minor differences in the population percentages used for calculating weighted votes and how much each municipality has to pay as a voting member.

It shifted Moore County’s population to 19.8 percent of the total population, which was not enough to increase its weighted vote. The only change is that the county would have to pay about \$800 more to cover its part of the local match.

During the discussion, Whispering Pines representative Pamela Harris raised that with Foxfire withdrawing and no change to the voting structure, the smaller municipalities have one less vote overall.

“In all honesty, I wonder if that — and I hate to ask Janice — but maybe that was one of their considerations,” She said. “Why put yourselves on the line to have to disclose all of your financial stuff to the public if your one vote will never really make a difference anyway?”

Gregorich agreed partially, saying the members of the village’s council had other questions and reasons each did not want to fill out the paperwork.

“We don’t negotiate contracts. We’re not awarding,” Gregorich said. “We are saying these are the projects we want, but a lot of decisions are made before they ever get to us as far as who is doing the work, so to disclose financial information as of the end of the year when you’re not voting at the end of the year ... It just made no sense to release all of this information unless I am misunderstanding how it is used. And it’s public information.”

She said she would understand it more if it was not public and only used by the Department of Transportation. N.C. Board of Transportation member Pat Molamphy said he agreed with her, but reiterated it is a state requirement.

“This is the first time in 35 years we’ve had a municipality withdraw from an MPO or a (rural planning organization) because of an unwillingness to file a SEI. But it’s state statutes,” he said.

Aberdeen Mayor Robbie Farrell said he would have liked to know about this ethics requirement early. He shared that Aberdeen’s alternate representative, Wilma Laney, also declined to complete the paperwork. Commissioner Teresa Beavers has taken her position as an alternate.

In other action, the governing board:

- \* reviewed its budget for next year, which includes \$86,000 for a consultant to help create a metropolitan transportation plan. But that work is likely to cost upwards of \$150,000 and require future funding; and

- \* reviewed the SMPO’s public participation plan, which outlines requirements about public comments and advertising meetings.

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