

Tensions rise between Belville, Leland leaders



This aerial photo shows construction off of U.S. 74-76 at the first Leland exit in Belville. Belville officials insist that Leland has filed formal complaints about many of the improvements the town has tried to make in recent years. KEN BLEVINS/STARNEWS

Downtown development talks prompt latest conflict

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

BELVILLE AND LELAND — Leaders of Belville and Leland are both adamant that the towns need to learn how to get along.

And yet the towns can't seem to stop fighting.

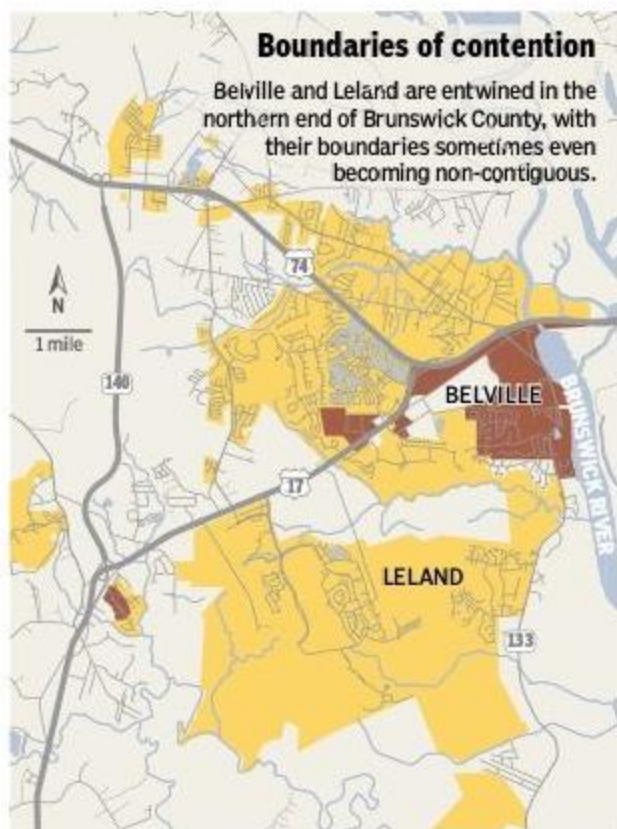
Since Leland officials tried and failed to merge the North Brunswick towns in 2012 — an effort that resulted in then-Belville mayor Jack Batson scrawling his resignation on a blank sheet of paper — there have been many battles, mostly political but occasionally personal. The spats have taken place in any number of venues, including at regular meetings of the towns' governments,

but also via attempts to lobby state officials.

Leland's attempts to convince legislators to pass a law allowing the town to vote to open an ABC store — legislation that is stalled in Senate committee — resulted in formal opposition from Belville.

Belville's support for H2GO's building a reverse osmosis plant in Leland that the smaller town claims would provide an alternate water source in the event of a disaster met disapproval from Leland.

The town's mayors sniped at each other last summer when Mayor Brenda Bozeman read a letter during an August



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From Page A1

2014 Leland council meeting that praised Leland employees, but criticized Belville for being unresponsive. That led to Belville Mayor Mike Allen firing back at his town's regular meeting, saying Bozeman was "denigrating" Belville.

The friction between the towns seems to have come to a head, though, with Leland's sitting down with Urban Smart Growth, the developer signed on to develop Belville's downtown since 2007. While there are no formal agreements between the developer and Leland, the larger town did pass a resolution saying it supported the development of the area and would be willing to accept the proposed development into its boundaries.

Urban Smart Growth

There is no direct reference to de-annexation of the downtown area in the resolution, but a May email obtained via a StarNews records request has shown that Michael White, USG's representative in the area, believed N.C. Secretary of Commerce John Skvarla would work to de-annex the area from Belville.

For their part, Leland officials are adamant that they aren't trying to take the downtown property, which sits along the Brunswick River, away from Belville. USG, they said, approached the town to discuss its situation with Belville.

"We have enough developers of our own that we need to work with, and we don't have time to go out and steal somebody else's. We don't play games that way," Bozeman said. "But when a developer calls me and says, 'Can we talk to you about what your town has to offer?' It's my job to say yes."

The intent of Leland's motion, Bozeman added, was to develop the area in concert with Belville to benefit the whole region. During the first meeting between town officials and the developer, about a year ago, Bozeman said, the mayor threw up her arms when de-annexing the downtown Belville area came up and insisted her town would have no part of it.

Allen and Belville, though, were disturbed enough by the discussions between Leland and the developer that the town filed a breach of contract lawsuit against USG.

"I was shocked though when I heard that (Leland officials) were physically sitting down and talking with our developer when they knew that the town of Belville had an existing contract with that entity," Allen said. "That, I couldn't understand."

David Hollis, Leland's town manager, indicated Thursday that Leland would not actively play a role in any de-annexation of Belville's downtown district.

"It's not our problem and we don't want to get roped into that," Hollis said.

Brunswick Riverfront Park

Relations between the two

towns were relatively smooth until Nov. 4, 2013, Bozeman said.

That night, Brunswick County's commissioners were set to discuss an agreement that would return Brunswick River Park to Belville's control. Belville, particularly Commissioner Joe Breault, had ambitious plans for the park, some of which have already come true.

Before the county's commissioners met on Nov. 4, 2013, Leland's council called a special meeting. There, they discussed and agreed to send the county commissioners a letter, drafted by Bozeman, with a list of 10 questions ranging from whether the park could be sold to how Belville planned to maintain public access without restrictions, as well as the park's upkeep.

Leland's council also was worried, Bozeman said, that county commissioners were overlooking the improvements their staff had made in the area.

"It was just plainland when the county got it. They used county money to fix it up," Bozeman said. "I feel like the citizens of the county should have gotten something back in return. It didn't, I expressed my opinion and I let it go. What was done was done."

Since the park was returned to Belville's control in December 2013, the town has built a nature trail and an education pavilion. By Oct. 1, the town plans to build a 130-foot-long observation pier, a 100-foot-long bridge spanning salt and freshwater marshes, a 125-foot-long fishing pier and a 700-foot-long boardwalk.

The park episode was the first of several where Belville's officials perceived Leland as meddling in their affairs, but it would soon be followed by Leland's efforts to get an ABC store and the Urban Smart Growth discussions.

"We have done nothing to interfere with the town of Leland. Nothing," Allen said. "But they have fought tremendously to try to destroy anything that we work on or any project that we do."

When asked about the perception that Leland is targeting or hounding Belville, at least one Leland official was incredulous.

"We know that we are better off unified, we know that, and we have to continue to try to convince them that that's the best way for everybody to go, but that doesn't mean that we're chasing (Belville) for goodness sakes," said Pat Batleman, Leland's mayor pro tem.

No unification

Almost any discussion about the relationship between Belville and Leland is shadowed by the beliefs of some, including several Leland council members, that Belville shouldn't be a separate entity.

As North Brunswick's largest town, Leland has often led those discussions.

"Their concept is the bigger you are, the more power you have, the more resources you can draw in," Allen said. "My

concept is, the bigger you are, the more money you want to spend."

U.S. Census population estimates from 2014 predicted Leland had 17,015 residents, compared to Belville's 2,059, Navassa's 1,542, Northwest's 764 and Sandy Creek's 267.

In July 2012, Belville's residents staunchly opposed efforts to merge their town with Leland, with a dozen people showing up at the town commissioners' regular meeting to voice their disapproval. Much of their concern was that Belville's tax rate would rise. Belville's tax rate is 6.83 cents per \$100 of property valuation, significantly lower than Leland's 15.15 cents per \$100.

Officials from the two towns met for about a month to vet the idea before that July 2012 meeting.

Allen is adamant that no talks of a merger will begin until he hears his town demanding it, something he views as unlikely.

"It will not be on the table," he said, "until my townspeople start either sending me emails or walking in my office and telling me we want to merge with Leland."

Leland officials insist that thoughts of a merger are no longer coloring their decision-making, even if they think it is still a logical step.

"This whole area here should be one area," Bozeman said, referring to the idea that North Brunswick's five towns should be formally unified. "But if they don't want to merge, that's OK. We dropped it three years ago."

Getting together

Allen and Bozeman plan to meet in person some time this week to try to sort out the differences between their towns.

Bozeman said she is tired of being at functions and having another person come up to her and say, "They really hate you," speaking about Belville.

"I want the crap to stop," Bozeman said. "It's ridiculous. We're too close together and we've all got too much to have all of this going on."

For his part, Allen said he'd like to see a memorandum of understanding between the towns' governments, as well as regular meetings between representatives from all five governments in the northern end of Brunswick County.

At the very least, Allen said, he wants committees from Leland and Belville's governments to meet monthly or quarterly to discuss the area and find a way the towns can benefit each other.

"We've got to find a way instead of this argumentative fighting behind the scenes," he said. "If we work together we can make a lot of things happen. We can support each other a lot. We've got some good things going on, they've got some good things going on."

— Contact Adam Wagner at 910-343-2389 or via email at Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com.