

**Katherine C. Grier
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Dear friends:

I am writing as a private citizen to express, and explain, my opposition to the construction of the Friends of Onancock School Pavilion on the grounds of the Historic Onancock School. My opposition to the construction of the building and its associated fencing on the property is based on a number of factors. These include, but are not limited to, multiple failures in planning and communication on the part of the trustees of the Friends of Onancock School and failures of due diligence on the part of the Town of Onancock. The entire pavilion project has been marked by its heedlessness of the interests of the community and an appalling lack of transparency. These failures have contributed substantially to the opposition of my neighbors and other citizens of our town. They led to my own opposition, too, although I have since identified further problems with the project.

Let me note, for the sake of transparency on my part, that I was on the board of the Friends of Onancock School when trustee Rick King, the proponent and principal funder, announced this project. The secrecy that he tried to maintain; his claim that he would be able to raise all the required funds without a public capital campaign; and his statement that board members who questioned the project were “negative” then convinced me that I could no longer serve on the board. I have made one public statement against the project, at a Town Council meeting, but I want to explain my opposition in detail.

1. From its inception, the HOS Pavilion project has been marked by a shocking lack of transparency. When Mr. King first presented his plans -- drawings, architectural renderings and an outrageous business plan that included large concerts from Year One of the pavilion’s operation --to the FOS board, he repeatedly required that we return all materials to him before each meeting adjourned. He announced at the time that he and his economic peers would pay for the entire project and did not want a public capital campaign. As he made the rounds for various permits and talked about his plans to persuade potential big-money donors, he excluded other board members and even the executive director, from participation. I do not believe that Mr. King’s intentions are dishonorable, but I do think that they have been marked by arrogance. I think that he believed that if construction could begin before funding was in place, then the project would be regarded as too far along to stop if organized public opposition did emerge.

This absence of transparency continued, even in public meetings where the FOS board was supposed to present full plans to the interested public. The

exclusion of a truly representative sample of community members (“stakeholders”) from the entire project planning process was especially egregious. Working with stakeholders is a fundamental part of non-profit practice. The exclusion also reveals disrespect for the growing group of citizens who expressed legitimate concerns about the project’s impact on quality of life in Onancock. Digging a foundation and pouring concrete before almost all community members were aware of the project was in fact a strategy, undertaken so that the public would be unable to stop the project, or impact its scope. I will not address the troublesome character of the funding supposedly obtained so far for the FOS Pavilion, but I urge you to explore this topic further.

2. I object to the FOS Pavilion’s location in a residential neighborhood, and to its impact on the school site itself. When I was a board member of the Friends of Onancock School, we produced a realistic strategic plan that prioritized rehabilitation of the old Home Economics cottage into an art classroom and rental space. We considered a small stage that could serve the local community for locally focused concerts and other performances. A small stage was appropriate for the community orientation and limited capacity of FOS. The small stage was not, however, the first priority in the strategic plan. The FOS board recognized the school’s property serves as an important “commons” for the Onancock community and envisioned a more organic approach to rehabilitation of the property. The current pavilion plan, which includes an attempt to fence and gate the entire core property, is an attack on this commons. The fence will send an unfortunate message about its changed, monetized character. The pavilion’s large size will be an intrusion on the physical and sonic landscape.

More concrete, however, will be the impact of the pavilion on the values of a substantial number of residential properties. For the owners of houses that are near the project, the FOS Pavilion project is likely to erode the values of their properties. For many of us, our houses are our single most valuable asset. This is a low blow to our economic futures. Mr. King does not live in Onancock. He will not be affected personally by his plans for scores of heavily amplified concerts with hundreds of parked cars and spillover in the form of noise, litter, and impaired access to dwellings.

3) The misguided project for the pavilion actually threatens the existence of the Friends of Onancock School. The Friends of Onancock School is an all-volunteer organization with a single overtaxed director and a small cohort of dedicated volunteers. Its focus is on local work in the arts and on community recreation in nature. Although it has enjoyed some notable success with rentals and events, it has limited capacity as an organization and has difficulty raising funds from the community it wishes to serve. (It has enjoyed success in getting grants for small projects like the playground; the director deserves all the credit for this.)

FOS labors under a lease that was, I believe, created under the unspoken assumption on the part of council members and the mayor at the time that the group would eventually fail under the burden of the deteriorating building. The group has made the grounds in particular an important community asset, and the rentable rooms are valued by many community groups. However, FOS has been unable to raise the necessary funds to guarantee the future of the main building itself. It has a failing roof, an ancient furnace, leaky windows, marginal plumbing, and other considerable structural problems. Volunteers have done yeoman's service keeping the place open, but the time is coming when a major influx of cash, as much as one million dollars, will be necessary to keep the building standing and open to the public. Construction on the FOS Pavilion began before even one quarter of its required funds had been raised, which violates best practice for non-profit organizations in every way I can imagine.

Because of the failing school building, the board of the Friends of the Onancock School have created a well-intended but misguided linkage between the expensive renovations required for the building and the construction of the Pavilion. For people who have a sentimental attachment to the site, this represents a "hail Mary" attempt to solve the looming problems in the historic building. It also reflects the limits of the organization's capacity for fund raising. Desperation has also led to acceptance of an ill-considered and unrealistic business plan for the use of the FOS Pavilion. The revised plan, presented in public, hinges on an extensive amplified concert series in the third year. (This is a revision from the first plan I saw, which proposed the series in the first year of operation.) I believe that no one on the current board understands what it will take to run the FOS Pavilion in service of this concert series. They also do not fully understand the impact this would have on the community. (Comparing a large amplified concert to a community football game 50 years ago is ingenuous.) Further, the kinds of concerts proposed – including "tribute bands" and second-tier country musicians – does not seem to advance the FOS mission of enhancing local participation in the arts.

4) The Town of Onancock's longstanding hands-off approach to the Historic Onancock School is also at fault. The Onancock Town Council, in their capacity as the representatives of the town as landlord, failed to exercise due diligence in approving a set of incomplete and ill-considered plans for the FOS Pavilion last March. Council failed to ask for a full, realistic accounting of its impacts. It was convenient to believe Rick King's pitch for the project: it looked like the town would be getting something for free. The current spread sheet provided by Mr. King projecting the costs and potential revenues for events over five years is so vague and lacking in detail that it is almost useless as a tool for making an informed decision. These numbers are being used as the primary justification for

why the pavilion should be built at all. To accept them without questioning from where they came from, along with the assumptions that underlie them, constitutes a failure of the Town Council to do basic due diligence and to fulfill its fiduciary responsibilities as both community representatives and individuals.

I believe that, to protect the Town of Onancock from any potential legal and financial liabilities, the Council is obligated to do its own profit and loss analysis. This must be independent of the FOS Board and must be done before ever voting to move this project forward. In fact, the town could wind up with a large facility that costs a lot to operate and maintain while the remaining original buildings disintegrate from the lack of funding for their care. Perhaps the Town Council assumes that the FOS Pavilion will be the engine that revives local business, but this is an assumption that requires a great deal of clear-eyed, objective analysis in the future. Master planning for the town needs to include frank discussion of the realistic future of the school property and the two historic buildings there.

Concluding thoughts. I do not know Rick King's motivations for pressing on with the FOS Pavilion, which has occupied his considerable energies for a year or more. He has insulated himself from criticism and has not spoken out as public concern about the project has developed. Rather, other board members have been carrying the burden of representing the project to the public. I regard the FOS Pavilion as a well-intentioned but misguided effort to solve the financial problems of the Friends of Onancock Schools by proposing an over-large performance pavilion and creating a bizarrely unrealistic business plan to justify the construction.

We are all aware how divisive the FOS Pavilion project has become. I believe all thoughtful citizens of Onancock are sorry that this is the case. My intent in writing this letter is to ask the Town Council to focus away from personalities and individual sentiments and to gather as much factual data as possible independent of the materials provided by the FOS board before allowing the project to proceed. We are facing a significant business decision with implications not only for town planning but also for homeowners whose assets are at risk. And this is also a situation where quality-of-life questions in our town loom larger than they have for a very long time. I hope that the points I have made in this admittedly long letter will help you in making a well-informed, fact-based decision that reflects the needs and wishes of all the citizens of Onancock.

Sincerely,

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