

Rick and I recently attended our 5th Great Loop Fall Rendezvous held at Joe Wheeler Park in Rogersville, Alabama. We gave two major talks and loved seeing all our Looper friends. What most people at the Rendezvous did not know was that the day before leaving for that event, we attended a hearing before the Board of Elections in our home county. Our right to vote had been challenged on the grounds that we were not residents of Topsail Beach, a place we have called home for nearly 15 years.

This was the second time in two years that our residency was challenged. The first time actually happened while we were on our loop in 2009. That year, as we traveled down the Western Rivers on our boat, we were clearly not able to go home to the east coast to face the challenge. So we were denied the right to vote in a crucial municipal election. This time, the hearing was held just before the fall Rendezvous and we were more than happy to face our challengers.

It was interesting that while at the Rendezvous, as we waited to hear the decision regarding our own residency, the subject of residency came up several times in discussions. Many attendees will recall the final question and answer session in which transient boaters were wondering aloud what they should do about the residency issue. Rick and I did not respond to those questions, silently knowing that our decision regarding that very subject would come by lunch time the following day. We were confident that we would win the challenge, and that confidence was boosted by the Judge that happened to be at the Rendezvous that did respond to the question, saying that residency is simply a question of where you intend to return when you complete your transient lifestyle.

We think it might be helpful to other boaters to know the details of what happened in our situation. The short version is that we won a unanimous decision by the Board of Elections, upholding our residency status based on several factors including a continuous voting history dating back to 1997 in the Town of Topsail Beach. Other factors cited in the decision included the fact that we pay taxes on numerous vehicles and trailers dating back more than 5 years. Our Federal Income tax returns and bank accounts show Topsail Beach as our home address. The Homeland Security documentation of our boat as well as FCC documentation shows Topsail Beach as our home address.

For those that want more details, read on:

The challenge against us was officially made by a person I barely know and have never had a conversation with. Her evidence was laughable: she never sees my car at my house, she never sees me in local restaurants or at the post office. She says I'm not involved in community activities. She says she has lived at Topsail Beach for 20 years and someone like me who only comes occasionally (according to her) cannot possibly love Topsail the way she does and therefore should not be allowed to vote there. None of those accusations have anything to do with legal residency, but I responded anyway. She must have been surprised to learn that I have been an active affiliate at the local Emma Anderson Chapel my entire life, having served on many committees and having published their directory as a volunteer project twice. She must have been surprised to learn that I had been the Membership Chairman for the local Historical Society for several years. She must have been shocked to hear that I was appointed by the Town Board and served for several years as a member of the Topsail Zoning Board of Adjustments, a position that requires residency status. Rick has served on two Pender County juries in the past 5 years. I supplied supporting documentation for all these things. I never asked for, expected nor received any kind of proclamation for these activities that I did simply as a service to my church and my community, a place that I have loved for over 60 years (at the risk of revealing my age!)

Finally, she said that she only sees me occasionally at town board meetings. From the time I claimed Topsail Beach as my permanent domicile in 1997 until I began extended travel in 2009 I attended virtually every single Commissioner's Meeting, as well as many Planning Board Meetings and other committee meetings. In the early years I often was the only member of the public there, and over the years I encouraged my friends and neighbors to take a more active role in their community.

After presenting her flimsy evidence, this challenger turned the floor over to her "witness," a member of our current Board of Commissioners. It became immediately obvious that these two people had been stalking me and my husband for several years. This Commissioner had handfuls of printouts from the blog that we kept while on our 10 month Loop trip, but those printouts showed only selective passages that referred to another home we own in Sneads Ferry. It is true we own a home in Sneads Ferry and that is where we spent a great deal of time because that is where we owned a boat slip in a marina suitable for our boat at that time. By only presenting a couple of pages from the blog myself, I was easily able to counteract these baseless charges and show that we call our home Topsail Beach. Sneads Ferry is just where we keep our boat and where we began and ended our Great Loop trip. I call the charges baseless because this has nothing to do with residency, only with snooping into people's lives. And I include this so that other Loopers who publish a blog, (which clearly is for members of the boating community, Loopers, Looper Wannabes and friends) be aware that there are lurkers out there that will read your blog for purposes other than simple enjoyment and education.

This Commissioner also had page after page of deeds from properties we own both in Onslow and Pender County, speculating aloud that perhaps the reason we had changed our ownership on some of the deeds was because we had been posturing for the past two years in preparation for another residency challenge (it was he that challenged us in 2009). Absolutely laughable! I guess he's never heard of "estate planning." His most ridiculous speculation, which I think borders on being defamation, was when he said perhaps the reason we don't have a dock in front of our house at Topsail Beach is because that particular property has multiple owners (again, for estate purposes) and perhaps we can't agree on what kind of dock to put or how much money to spend. My family has owned that piece of property since the 1950s and the subject of putting a dock there has never, ever, ever even been considered. This man simply makes things up to suit his purpose.

When we explained (needlessly because it has nothing to do with residency) that we spend a great deal of time on the larger boat that we purchased in December, this challenger stated that if we really wanted to live at Topsail Beach we could bring that boat here and dock it in front of our house. Clearly he knows nothing about boats that size, and apparently hasn't stalked us enough to know that the "deep water" (his term) in front of our house is at best 2-3 feet at low tide. His statement that the local commercial fishing boat comes right in front of our house twice a day was equally laughable.....there is a huge sandbar between us and the main channel...of course the overhead photo he showed had been clipped not to show that! When he speculated that we could rent or lease a slip somewhere at Topsail to keep the boat since we say it is too shallow in front of our house, he neglected to realize that we need pumpout, fuel, cable hookup, etc., none of which is available anywhere at Topsail Beach.

But none of that has to do with residency. He did read paragraph after paragraph out of the document "Residency for Election Purposes" that is published by the NC Board of Elections. But again his reading was selective and self serving. I only had to read 2 sentences from that same document: "A person may have an actual abode (residence) in one place, and their permanent established home (domicile) in

another. A domicile is the place to which the person intends to return.” After leaving our previous home in Wilson, Rick and I established Topsail Beach as our domicile in 1997 and have never left. So after nearly two hours all that these two people had proven is that we do own property other than our residence at Topsail Beach.

The final laugh came when the challengers said we had been preparing ourselves for this challenge for the past two years, since we were challenged in the last municipal election year 2009. We had already presented all the documentation required by the Board, some of which went back as much as 10 years....credit card records, checking accounts, repair bills, vet bills, utility bills, Federal Tax returns, etc. But when Rick pointed out that we paid much more in taxes by being residents of Topsail Beach, thereby paying city as well as county taxes, which we would not have to do if we claimed residency in unincorporated Sneads Ferry, one of the board members asked if it would be OK for him to call the tax office to verify that fact. We said of course, and the phone conversation, heard by all over the speaker phone, showed that we have been paying numerous automobile, trailer and boat taxes in Topsail Beach/Pender County for many years, not just the two years that we’ve supposedly been “posturing” for residency.

This is the third municipal election in a row that this Councilman has tried to manipulate, once by encouraging voter fraud himself (a charge which was neither dismissed nor prosecuted...in other words he received a slap on the wrist), and twice by these intimidating tactics of challenging voter registration. In the last election he was “successful” in removing over 50 people from the roles, many of whom were dead or had moved away and just not gotten around to changing their voter registration, which they can do right up to the day of the election by the way. Removing the departed from the roles is not his job, it is the job of the Board of Elections and generally will simply happen naturally in the long run. It is sad that these people are so insecure in the viability of the candidates they endorse that they have to stoop to this kind of stalking and intimidation.

Thankfully, Rick and I are not so easily intimidated. We rather enjoyed the process.

And so, to my transient boating friends that have taken the time to read this far, if you are in the planning stages for your loop, simply get your ducks in a row as to where you intend to vote prior to leaving on your trip. Check the requirements in your state (each state is different) as to what is required to claim a “domicile for voting purposes.” This will probably include paying property taxes, State as well as Federal Income Taxes using your domicile address, vehicle taxes and registrations, driver’s license, etc. As it happens, Rick and I had moved to and claimed Topsail Beach as our residence long before we had even heard of the Great Loop, but others may need to take this into consideration in their planning process.

Many of our looping friends associate us with Sneads Ferry because that is the place where we kept our loop boat, and it is that place that you Loopers can actually see from your boat as you pass by, whereas our residence at Topsail Beach is on the island, on the other side of the marshes, not on the ICW. We can probably see you from there with binoculars, but you can’t see us nor can you get your boats into that shallow water! If we come out to greet you, it will probably still be from Sneads Ferry.

We are currently preparing the Rick ‘n Roll 3 for more long range cruising beginning shortly, with preliminary plans to be in places between Myrtle Beach and Beaufort, SC, prior to heading back north to

see you all in Norfolk for the Spring Rendezvous beginning on May 7. Those that are still counting how many nights we spend at Topsail Beach between now and this time next year will have a tough time keeping track of us! But that has nothing to do with residency!!

