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Article published Jun 30, 2007

Rutherford should revive impact study for better planning

For the sake of good planning, Rutherford County needs to revive a proposal to determine the impact of new subdivisions on services such as roads and schools.

In 2006, members of the Rutherford County Regional Planning Commission were considering a method for figuring out how much the county would have to spend in response to development. Figures were to be gathered for the impact of subdivision plans on schools, roads, emergency services and law enforcement.

But when Planning Commissioner Bob Farris took the proposal to newly-elected County Mayor Ernest Burgess, it ended there.

"It died when the new mayor, Ernest Burgess, got elected. He stopped the study," Farris said.

According to Planning Director John Davis, Burgess said he didn't have funding available to conduct the study. Planning commissioners expected to spend between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Burgess this week confirmed he stopped the proposal because he didn't feel the county had the resources or expertise to complete such a comprehensive study. He also was unsure what the county would be able to do with the study once completed, since the General Assembly had already balked at passing a local act to raise the county development fee.

While it's disappointing the county mayor didn't push the proposal, in his defense, Burgess was slammed with issues when he took the post last year.

No matter what happened last year, though, it is time for the county to revisit this proposal. Planners are discussing several ways to revamp the planning process to determine the impact of large subdivisions before bulldozers start scraping dirt.

They want developers to donate land for schools or open spaces, and they want large subdivisions to be prohibited on roads less than 18 feet in pavement width. No doubt, if Rutherford County allows a 100-home subdivision to be built on a pig path, it's going to create an unsafe situation. Eventually, the county will have to pay for the road's expansion.

County officials now believe each new lot developed in a subdivision costs more than \$8,000 just to build schools. Planners hope to lessen that burden, possibly by restricting new subdivisions if they are going to put an undue strain on the county school system.

Whether the planning department could charge developers \$8,000 per lot for a portion of the cost is unlikely. The state Legislature won't allow Rutherford County to raise its \$1,500 development fee, especially after passing a new state adequate facilities tax that would provide counties a mechanism for charging \$1 per square foot on development. Burgess, however, doesn't believe that law would benefit the county financially.

That may be true, but the county needs to continue pushing for an impact study plan. At the least, it could help planners determine how much a new subdivision will cost the county. At the most, it could persuade lawmakers to allow a more generous growth tax for Rutherford County.
