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Sneak Attack

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In Virginia, nervous home builders seek a sudden change.

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FOR MORE than 30 years, Fairfax County, now this region's largest jurisdiction, has benefited from a fragile balance of power between property developers and local government. Under a system devised in the 1970s and since adopted throughout the state, developers who want to build many new neighborhoods, office parks and shopping centers have been obliged to bargain with local officials. In return for a green light for zoning approvals, developers routinely cough up the equivalent of millions of dollars to help counties build roads, schools, parks, libraries, and police and fire stations -- the services necessary to absorb the fresh residents and workers who will occupy the new buildings.

The system has worked, although the debate about its equity has never really faded; much of the cost of construction has been passed on by developers to the newcomers who use the new infrastructure. Now, suddenly, panicky home builders, faced with the housing slump, have decided the entire system should be scrapped and replaced with something they insist would be more predictable -- for them. For Northern Virginians, it may be a raw deal. Trouble is, no one really knows.

The new system, though evidently in the works for months, appeared jack-in-the-box style in [Richmond](#) 10 days ago. Legislation to enact it was introduced on the last day possible in the General Assembly, leaving stunned [Northern Virginia](#) officials scrambling to assess the potential impact. In the case of [Fairfax](#), an initial analysis indicated that it could cost the county tens of millions of dollars annually.

Under the home builders' bill, the old system in Northern Virginia would be replaced with a regimen by which builders would pay a flat impact fee -- \$8,000 for a detached single-family house, \$5,000 for a townhouse. That, say the builders, would protect newcomers (and the builders themselves) from what they consider extortionate sums demanded by some jurisdictions.

The developers freely admit they have no idea what the overall revenue impact of their proposal would be. A study they commissioned looked at just two counties and was not based on the bill as introduced. Given the unknowns, it would be the height of irresponsibility to go forward with a bill with so many implications for development and local government revenue around the state. Better to commission a thorough, serious analysis and revisit the subject next year.

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