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Opinion

Impact Fees Should Be On The Table

posted April 22, 2005

While it is very entertaining to watch certain elected members of our county pontificate on the importance of this, that or the other while debating the future of our children, it would appear to me that some have missed the boat. The Hamilton County Commissioners appear to be staking their position on not raising taxes in order to pay for a school system that is increasingly demanding more resources. The School Board appears to be staking their position on requiring full funding for all of our children to have a quality education. Both sides play to the emotions in their attempt to sway support from the voters.

Commissioner Adams gets acrimonious and personal with his remarks toward Dr. Register and the School Board (remarks that this Republican finds extremely offensive and completely uncalled for), while Rhonda Thurman accuses other School Board Members who want to fund education in the classroom of "trying to throw 100 teachers under a bus" because they want to fund EDUCATION before extra-curricular activities.

When I suggested that she and the School Board begin to try to work with the County Commission by offering solutions to the challenge of increasing funding to meet the demand (by potentially using impact fees on the 1,000 homes being built in the

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Ooltewah school zones to help pay for the solution to the already overcrowded schools there), she accused me of "wanting to tax employers out of business." My family has been building houses in this country since we emigrated from Ireland 152 years ago. I am a licensed builder in the state of Tennessee, I currently work in land development and for the past five years I have been an advocate for affordable housing and high performance construction. I have taught courses to code officials, architects, builders and developers throughout the Southeastern United

States. It would be safe to say that I know something about residential construction.

As a conservative, I believe that we should be responsible for the consequences of our actions (whether overcrowded schools due to unchecked development or runaway spending due to fiscal irresponsibility). Most developers that I know personally have accepted impact fees (or some variation) as their responsibility to the community at large. Impact fees do not tax employers out of business. In fact, a study that was published by The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy in June 2003 concluded that impact fees ensure benefits to those who pay them and improve the efficiency of providing infrastructure. This paper also concluded that impact fees do not slow job growth - the fees can act as grease that keeps job growth moving in the local economy. Impact fees are payments made by developers for the infrastructure that they receive (Ms. Thurman, the current fees they pay do not cover the full costs of the development to the community); the infrastructure that they receive provides a future benefit to them in the form of less congestion, better schools, better municipal services, etc.

The impact fee must be spent based upon a comprehensive plan that allows developers to increase their supply of buildable land. In the concluding line of the study, the authors stated "Given tax limitations and growing demand for infrastructure investment, communities in growing regions that have impact fees may become more prosperous in the long run than communities in such regions without them." Impact fees have been used irresponsibly by communities and that has generated negative reactions from politicians who cater to the influential crowd. However, in 2003 several Durham, N.C., developers were proposing to donate money to the school system while the proposed impact fees were being challenged. In 2004, the largest Home Builders Association in the U.S. came out in support of impact fees that funded areas affected by residential projects. Right now in Williamson County, a developer (Southern Land Company) has donated land to the County School Board for the construction of a new elementary school near their 2,000 home development.

The whole point of my original statement that set Ms. Thurman off was that in this day and age, the old solutions are not working and we all have to work together to come up with a solution that is a Win/Win for everyone. Impact fees are one scenario; however, everyone (County Commissioners, School Board members, developers, City Council members, and the citizens of Hamilton County) need to find the solutions to these problems. You will not find those solutions if you are constantly demeaning those you must deal with, especially if you want to ensure that the children of Hamilton County get the finest public education possible.

If Ms. Thurman would take the time to visit 21st Century Academy (or any of the other magnet schools she wants to close), she would find that those schools are thinking creatively to provide that education. Some schools are getting grants to help alleviate some of this financial strain imposed by short sighted members of the County Commission (the schools are doing this, not the Central Office); some schools, like 21st Century Academy, combine grade levels in a single classroom so that we are at an appropriate teacher-student ratio. We have found that this practice



develops a community of learners who benefit from the experience (check out our test scores- the proof is in the pudding!). We have a small high school component because we LACK THE PHYSICAL SPACE NEEDED TO GROW. Now I learned a long time ago not to compare apples and oranges, which is what happens when you compare magnet schools with traditional schools.

Community service is a component of our curriculum, as is the global education through technology, as is the 7 Habits. By educating our students that they are responsible for the choices they make, we have ended up with responsible high school students who can perform documented community service without constant adult supervision. I would encourage Ms. Thurman or any other School Board Member to check out the student created senior projects that showcase the success of this particular school. I think any citizen would be proud to have responsible high school students who live by principles instead of pressure; that is the type of student who is attracted to our school and who thrives at our school. As of this moment, we are at capacity for next year and have a waiting list. As to whether or not high school students are reading at grade level and are performing community service, I'm not sure where Ms. Thurman gets her numbers (although I would like to know); I will say that it is hard to get a student to read at the appropriate grade level if textbooks are not purchased in order for extra-curricular activities to get funded- a choice that Ms. Thurman and the other members of the School Board made. By the way, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 48% of American adults are functionally illiterate. Ms. Thurman, read the test scores from 21st Century Academy before callously throwing down charges of ineptitude on the part of our teachers.

In order to permit the community service portion of the high school curriculum, the 21st Century Academy works as a team and schedules are adjusted one day every other week (known as Flip Days). The elementary and middle school students take their afternoon courses in the morning and their morning classes in the afternoon while the high school students spend their mornings at the service sites (nonprofits and other schools, like Hillcrest Elementary) and take their morning classes in the afternoon. This schedule change allows the high school students to make up the classes they miss while performing off-site community service (service that helps other schools in the district!). This is another example of how 21st Century overcomes challenges through synergistic teamwork, always seeking the third alternative (not my solution or your solution, but a solution that we create together that benefits us all). If Ms. Thurman would just take the time to set aside her preconceived ideas about magnet schools and come visit us, she would be able to see first hand how our school culture has been cultivated to bring out the best in our students.

Ms. Thurman consistently throws out a "fact" that we lost 500 students last year, 3,000 students since the merger took place, and will lose a projected 500 students if middle school sports are cut, leading to a loss of State revenue of 1.2 million dollars. To the best of my knowledge, no one has tracked down the students we have lost to see why we lost them - I'm curious to find out how she arrives at that conclusion. I checked with the United States Bureau of Economic Analysis and found out that in the year 2000, Hamilton County had 2,150 residents who commuted to work in Catoosa County, Ga. An additional 1,694 residents commuted to work in Walker County, Ga. Another 2,150 residents commuted to work in Whitfield County, Ga., and 1,350 residents commuted to work in Bradley County, Tn. According to the 2000 Census, Hamilton County had just over 10,000 residents between the ages of 5 and 18. In an estimate done by the Census Bureau in 2003, we had just over 9,000 residents within the student age range. These kids didn't just leave the school system, they left the County! During that same time frame, we had over 6,000 residents between the ages of 18 and 65 leave...and I suspect that the two groups are connected, since most parents don't abandon their children.

I also suspect that one reason these populations left was due to the work related commute. While I have no direct evidence of this, I think there is enough data to support that idea, more data than we have for predicting 500 students will leave the County school system so they can play sports!

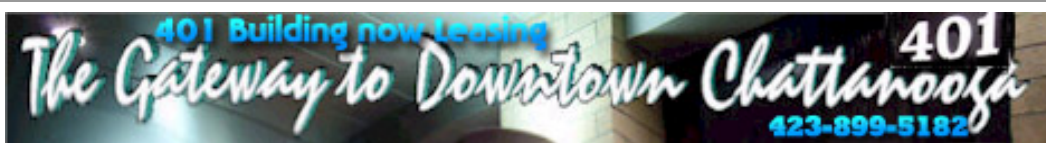
Some have suggested that I am against sports in school. I am not. I played basketball in junior high, have been a professional athlete overseas and understand the importance of extra-curricular activities like sports and music and the role they play in creating a well rounded individual. However, when faced with impossible fiscal demands from an unreasonable County Commission, the School Board should focus

on spending money wisely by investing in education first and extra-curricular activities second. My wife and I have made sacrifices so that our children can have the best we can provide - and I daresay that most parents in Hamilton County have done the same. We emphasize the importance of education, of physical training and the social benefits of teams and groups. However, we do not believe that it is the duty of the Hamilton County School Board to provide all of these things for us; we are primarily responsible. We have taken up a sport that we can do as a family (fencing- one of my younger sons selected it) and have three of our four children involved in an international youth development organization called The Young Marines. To paraphrase a great President, "Ask not what your County can do for you, but what you can do for your County".

I want to encourage all of the School Board members and County Commissioners to keep that statement ringing in their ears as we keep our eyes upon them. The future of this great county is at stake.

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