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## OUR OPINION

# A time to stand by their plan

Published: Monday, August 25, 2008 at 6:30 a.m.

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It's debatable in a time of lean budgets and a fat list of public needs whether it was a good idea for the Marion County Commission to reduce, albeit temporarily, road impact fees as a way to jump-start our stagnant housing market.

Granted, back on May 20, what mattered were their good intentions: to cut the impact fees by two-thirds on both residential and commercial development for 90 days in order to put some unemployed construction workers back on the job and food on those families' tables.

But last week, we saw how no good deed goes unpunished, as a group of builders are trying to get a retroactive bite at the apple.

Their argument is that they applied for building permits before the May 20 board vote to lower the fees, and although they have yet to remit their impact fees due to the county on their projects, they now want to take advantage of the commission's action and pay the lower amount.

If the board goes along with such thinking, it could deprive the county of up to \$3 million in revenue for road projects — at a time when they're considering borrowing \$100 million for road work.

Thankfully, however, there appeared to be little appetite for cutting all of the latecomers a break.

Yet what did gain traction was Commissioner Andy Kesselring's suggestion: to allow these builders' permits to expire then have them file again after Sept. 1 when the temporary cut elapses.

That would help commercial builders, the intended beneficiaries of the board's vote in May. Commissioners cut the fee for them because it often ran tens of thousands of dollars for their projects, compared to a one-time pre-May 20 fee of about \$6,100 for residential builders.

Homebuilders, meanwhile, would be stranded in the past, as on Sept. 1, the fee — now about \$2,100 — reverts to the original level.

In principle, commissioners should not backtrack in either case. Why these builders have not paid their impact fees is anyone's guess. But they had no guarantee the board would cut the fee on May 20, and if commissioners had chosen not to, they would still owe what they do today.

Moreover, if commissioners grant this request, they would invite chaos. No future county policy would be safe from people demanding that they should be subject to yesterday's regulations instead of today's. Commissioners would be eternally answering such objections.

But if the reality is that they must respond to this situation, Kesselring has a point. The previous impact fee method was flawed because of the steep rates in assessing commercial development. That was the necessary corrective, not residential building.

In May, Commissioner Stan McClain, a homebuilder, summed up his peers' plight in two words: "We overbuilt."

Recently, Karen Grider, president of the Ocala-Marion County Realtors Association, supported that assessment.

"There are a lot more homes in Marion County than we've ever had before," Grider told us, in part because of the building frenzy back in 2004-06 — when 500 homes going up a month was the norm.

"There was a tremendous amount of building at that time," she recalled. But as the economy soured, with increases in life's staples, people have held off. "People are afraid. They think, 'It's not so bad where I am,' and the main reason we have such a glut now is because people are waiting to see what happens with the election."

Before the boom, according to Grider, homes sold in six to eight months; at its height, houses sold in days, if not hours. Now, the wait is eight months to a year — if not more.

Yet, she said, home sales figures due out this week indicate optimism is growing, and the evidence suggests the housing market is rebounding.

If so, the County Commission, even if it opts for the Kesselring plan, needs to stand by its original premise: help commercial builders by cutting exorbitant rates and leave homebuilders alone. They got their big break when commissioners rejected their consultants' recommendation to raise the impact fee to nearly \$11,000, which would have made the real drivers of growth in Marion County begin to pay their way.

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