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About-face on growth in county

Lancaster officials are rethinking approach as developments pour in

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Over the past six to eight months, Lancaster County has done a near about-face in dealing with developers who want to turn the county's quiet northern end into a sea of subdivisions, county leaders say.

Homebuilders who once met little resistance now face tough questions from county councilmen.

Building permit fees are set to rise by 50 percent. Zoning changes are under consideration.

And soon, some new residents will find extra charges tacked onto their tax bills to pay for emergency services and a new Indian Land library.

"It's not the 'anything goes' attitude of two years ago," said Mick Mulvaney, a developer building the 2,300-home St. Katherine development near S.C. 75 and U.S. 521.

The attitude shift began the middle of last year, when the county started looking at early data from a Clemson University study on growth, County Administrator Chap Hurst said last week.

The study said that because Lancaster was growing faster than many counties in the state, new homes would carry costs for county services that could outstrip what taxes could pay for.

The final study predicted growth would cause a \$5 million shortfall in county service costs and a \$14 million shortfall in school costs over the next decade. That could mean hefty tax increases.

At the same time, plans for huge housing developments -- including Del Webb's 3,300-plus-home Sun City Carolina Lakes -- screeched into the planning office.

"We had never had projects of this magnitude before," Hurst said. "That's what concerned us so much. That's why we worked so fast to come up with a plan."

Since then, county leaders have sought to overhaul policies more suited to the open rolling hills that grace much of the rest of the county than the narrow strip of land south of Ballantyne in developers' bulls-eye.

They've also become more demanding of developers. The county began requiring developers to sign formal contracts, for instance.

Those contracts spell out what the county expects the developer to do to ease the burden of growth.

"We have become, I think as a county, a lot more savvy in negotiating with developers," said County Councilman Fred Thomas.

"It does get heated," he said. "But that's OK. We have to stick to our guns and do what's best."

The change has provoked some grumbling.

But Mulvaney -- who lives in Lancaster County though his company, Mulvaney Properties, is in Charlotte -- said the county isn't asking for anything unreasonable.

He said the relationship between the county and developers remains cooperative. The county is still more attractive to developers than other counties around Charlotte that charge impact fees costing thousands of dollars per home, he said.

"I think it's changed for the better," Mulvaney said. "It's not like we're not welcomed, or we go down there and we're seen as evil people like we are in other jurisdictions."

Last month, county officials held a "growth summit" to talk about the Clemson study's results. The county's population is roughly 65,000 now.

The study found that at the rate of growth predicted for the next decade, Lancaster County would likely:

- Need to hire more than 50 new county employees, including eight new emergency medical technicians, 11 new patrol officers and two building inspectors.
- Need to create new recreational space, including six ball fields and two soccer fields.
- Need to build two new emergency medical services substations and one sheriff's substation.

One of the study's authors, William Molnar of the Clemson Institute for Economic and Community Development, said he's watched the county react to the problem spelled out in the study.

The way the county used the information to start a conversation about managing growth has been "extremely well done," Molnar said.

Yet homebuilders' associations elsewhere have also hired consultants to look at the question of whether growth pays for itself, and some have come to a different conclusion, said John Cone, executive director of the Home Builders Association of South Carolina.

"In almost every conceivable case, the community comes out much better," he said.

Lancaster County traces its boom back to the late 1990s, when Belden Wire & Cable's arrival in Indian Land led to the extension of sewer lines that opened up new areas for large-scale development, said Hurst.

Since October, developers have pledged \$800,000 in contributions to county coffers to offset the cost of growth, Hurst said. That includes \$200,000 from Del Webb for Sun City.

The money means the expected \$5 million shortfall -- which is equal to about a quarter of the county budget now -- has already shrunk, Hurst said.

The county will keep looking for new ways to pay for growth, he said.

"You've got to be way ahead of this curve," he said.

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