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## Adopt Realistic Impact Fees

Polk County commissioners voted 4-1 last week to give initial approval to an increase in property taxes in the unincorporated areas of the county to fund parks and library improvements.

Hard work, to be sure. Some residents complained that the taxes weren't needed, or were burdens on retirees or others living on fixed incomes.

Raising taxes is difficult enough. This time, it's made more so because the county has a lot of catching up to do: \$600 million in unfunded road, park and library needs.

If commissioners approve what they're considering, it will mean an additional \$2.25 per

\$1,000 of taxable evaluation on homes in the unincorporated areas. For a \$75,000 home with a standard \$25,000 homestead exemption, that would mean an additional \$2 a week out of the family budget.

There is harder work ahead, however.

The reason we've gotten into crowded roads, overcrowded schools, substandard parks and not enough libraries has been because of the failure of past commissioners to control and address growth properly.

Polk County's school system has a \$300 million deficit in its facilities -- partly because the County Commission didn't approve a school impact fee until two years ago. When it was adopted, it was but a fraction of what the county's consultant said was needed and justified.

For past commissioners, imposing fair impact fees to pay for roads, public safety and other needed growth demands has been the hardest task of all. This time around, it's time for commissioners to address all the issues -- and that includes requiring growth to pay its own way.

Al Whittle, government affairs chair of Florida Bipartisan Civic Affairs Group, pointed out that shortcoming in the present approach. "The commission has done little to assure that future growth pays for itself or to tackle the hard policy issues and cultural changes required to achieve" the goals set forth by Polk Vision, a citizens' committee working on county priorities, Whittle wrote.

And while the tax plan seeks to catch up with decades of neglect, Whittle notes that there need to be measures in place to keep the gap from growing. "We must fix the [infrastructure gap]," said Whittle, "but first we must stop digging the hole deeper."

In the past several years, the gap has widened. The housing boom added more residents, making the hole deeper -- and since commissioners had refused to assess realistic impact fees, commissioners themselves helped with the digging.

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Last year, the county issued nearly 8,300 building permits for single-family homes. That brought in an additional \$13.3 million for the school system. But if the consultant's recommendation had been imposed, the schools would have collected nearly \$31.5 million for new construction. As it is,

residents who are already here will be asked to make up the shortfall.

It's long past time to readjust the pathetically low school impact fee. When commissioners get around to it, some of them might argue that with all the other recent increases, should the county further burden new home buyers with an impact fee as high as consultants recommend?

If that thought arises, commissioners should put the consultants' recommendation on the ballot and see if the voters agree that new growth should pay for its costs.

The smart money would bet that they will.

Misery loves company.



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