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## Advice is plentiful in debate on impact fees

By GREG HAMILTON, Citrus Times Editor of Editorials

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The County Commission looked at the latest offering from the Citrus County Builders Association and politely passed. Thanks, they said in effect last week, but we don't need it. We already have one.

The builders group stood ready to help the county create an impact fee advisory board, which presumably would have added even more information and opinions to the already convoluted impact fee review process.

Not that there is a shortage of such data when the fees, one-time charges on new construction to help offset the cost of growth, are being reconsidered. It's just that the builders have not been pleased with the results of those debates recently.

The CCBA has stated repeatedly that its members are not opposed to impact fees in general, but they do question the methodology that has been used to determine the rates that the county will charge in the eight fee categories.

Earlier this year, when the county was considering substantial increases in four of the fees, the builders challenged the numbers presented by the county's impact fee consultant and managed to tweak a few of the figures.

While the builders might point to that episode as an example of why the data must be more closely scrutinized, a role an advisory board would play, it also demonstrates that the builders have not been frozen out of the process. They have a voice already, and it is not being ignored.

If anything, there may be too many players involved. The county has a consulting firm that evaluates the fees and suggests adjustments. County staff members are involved as well. The CCBA has its own consultants, as well as its legal representation. During the last go-round, the Citrus Hills development company added its consultant's report to the fray.

Then there is the county's Planning and Development Review Board, which is supposed to fill the role that the CCBA envisioned for the impact fee advisory board. Unfortunately, when the going got tough in January,

the PDRB got silent.

The board forwarded the issue to the County Commission for a decision, without any specific recommendation on the proposed increases. This inaction served to open the door for the CCBA to urge the formation of an advisory board.

The suggestion is not entirely without merit. Similar boards exist in other Florida counties, and the Citrus County Commission in July voted to have staff members research them.

One proposed function of the advisory board, for example, could prove useful to the commissioners. The board would look into how the impact fee money is being spent each year by the government entities that receive the funds. Such an accounting could help answer questions from builders about whether the funds are being misspent.

There was, however, one glaring problem that doomed the CCBA's suggestion: Creating an advisory board would have added an unnecessary layer of review to an already cumbersome process.

Citrus County has seen what happens when the impact fee review process gets weighted down and delayed: The fees remain stuck for too long at bargain-basement levels. This is good for the building community and their customers, but not for existing Citrus County taxpayers, who must subsidize these low impact fee revenues with their property tax dollars.

The effect extends beyond property taxes. The County Commission's recent vote to raise the gasoline tax to help pay for millions of dollars in new road projects was made necessary because the transportation impact fee account is empty. Had the county raised the fees as it should have over the years, there would be more road money available and less urgency for raising the gas tax.

The commissioners made the right choice in rejecting the CCBA's proposal as redundant. However, they should insist that the PDRB meet its advisory responsibilities better the next time that impact fee recommendations are on the agenda.

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