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V.B. Price: Carte blanche

Sprawl developers given red light for irresponsible plans

By V.B. Price
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 The National Association of Industrial and Office Properties charged this month that development impact fees mandated by the Planned Growth Strategy in Albuquerque are a "tool of social engineers."

Use of such language implies that socially responsible planning is somehow subversive, almost communistic and definitely not in the interests of those who make their millions in unregulated, sprawling development.

Sprawl follows not the

market, but rather an artificial demand created by advertising and subsidized by invisible incentives, tax giveaways, bridges, roads, fire and police protection and other infrastructure freebies that keep costs down.

Impact fees, far from being forms of odious social engineering, are a fair way to counter the longstanding governmental bias against infill development that drives costs up.

For 30 years or more, sprawl developers have been given carte blanche to do whatever they want to do at public expense, while infill developers were often burdened with massive disincentives in the form political harassment.

While city government bent over backwards to do anything it could for sprawlers, and while sprawlers supported, with their massive war chests, the political campaigns of those who helped them, City Hall consistently thwarted redevelopment efforts with malign neglect.

Elections were won and lost by narrow margins,

but City Hall ignored those who called for redeveloping areas that already had expensive infrastructure in place, and it opted for giveaways at public expense for those wanting to build in areas where there was nothing but sand.

If impact fees were merely a payback for years of neglect and disrespect, they might be questionable.

Impact fees finally level out the public costs of development, and I stress the word "public." It costs the public millions to subsidize development on the fringes - hence, impact fees. It costs the public relatively nothing for infill growth - hence, minimal impact fees. Impact fees take sprawlers off the public dole.

This is just straight math and is about as far from social engineering as any other prudent public policy that tries to make sure Albuquerque and New Mexico grow in appropriate ways and not in irresponsible ways benefiting the few at the expense of all.

I suppose some people

might call efforts in the Legislature to regulate the drilling of private wells a form of social engineering. But they'd be wrong to do that. They might also imply that creating a strategic water reserve might hobble development in ways that are uncongenial to the marketplace. And they'd be wrong again.

Responsible stewardship of resources is not social engineering and not a communist plot.

There is more than one way to grow a vigorous economy in Albuquerque and New Mexico. It's time we look beyond the old-fashioned building-boom economy rooted in resource waste and taxpayer subsidy. Public financing of private development is a rut we don't need to be stuck in anymore.

Price is an Albuquerque freelance writer, author, editor and commentator.

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