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Assembly needs a change of direction on growth

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A fresh wind of suburban discontent blows in Richmond.

Last week's House GOP press conference endorsing a "sensible growth agenda" offers further proof. Determined not to be left behind in Gov. Tim Kaine's popular bid to link land use and transportation planning, the delegates trotted out a few useful ideas of their own.

But the House has a long history as the place where anti-sprawl legislation goes to die.

Despite a much more receptive Richmond to such issues, smart growth advocates will have to overcome a long history. For anyone expecting smooth sailing for the governor's anti-sprawl agenda — including the TDR proposal above — or even the less controversial House measures, The Washington Post provides a useful reality check.

According to a Post analysis, developers, residential builders, contractors and real estate interests handed out about \$1.4 million over the last decade to members of the House and Senate committees that will consider the land-use bills.

That exceeds giving by any other interest group whose legislation comes before the House Committee on Counties, Cities and Towns or the Senate Committee on Local Government.

Virginia Beach Del. Terrie Suit, R-Virginia Beach, a mortgage lender, is a top recipient, collecting \$124,052, according to The Post. Overall, the industry hasn't played favorites, giving to Democrats and Republicans alike. House Democratic Leader Frank Hall of Richmond leads the field with \$145,844 in donations, The Post said.

That's money well spent. Over the years, the development and construction industries have gotten most everything they wanted at the General Assembly.

Check out the 2004 record:

That's the year Sen. Fred Quayle, R-Chesapeake, a sensible conservative, dared to introduce a bill allowing local governments to reject new residential subdivisions if there weren't schools to accommodate them. In committee Quayle's bill netted a grand total of two aye votes, 11 nays, and one abstention.

Over in the House, Del. Bob Marshall, R-Manassas called for impact fees to be levied against developers whose projects strain education, transportation and water or sewer services. Del. Joe May, R-Leesburg, had a different impact fee bill, and Del. Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax, wanted localities to be able to reject new subdivisions when public facilities were inadequate.

In committee, all three bills were politely labeled "carried over until 2005." Then, they never surfaced again.

If citizens want or expect a different outcome this year, they'll have to make their voices heard, loudly and aggressively. Rest assured, developers and home builders aren't the least bit shy about speaking up. And after distributing so much goodwill over the years, they'll encounter plenty of open doors.

Suburbanites angry over long commutes and increasing sprawl have finally gotten the attention of Virginia lawmakers. But only a sustained outcry is likely to interrupt long-established patterns of doing business.

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