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Business First

Columbus' future should include impact fees, focused tax breaks and a little more cooperation between local governments, according to a group of community volunteers.

The 21st Century Growth Policy Team, a group of around 80 community representatives assembled by the city of Columbus, unveiled its recommendations on how the city should grow at a meeting Tuesday night. Columbus needed a new plan because it's running out of room to grow, said Mayor Michael Coleman, and can't always afford the infrastructure to support new development.

Columbus convened the team in February 2004. It included representatives from neighboring communities, business groups and community groups. It split into three subcommittees, which focused on promoting job growth, ensuring regional cooperation and figuring out how to pay for growth.

The pay-as-you-grow subcommittee focused special attention on two growth areas: Columbus' northeastern fringe and its southeastern area. The committee recommended developers pay \$1,300 for each house built in the southeast area and \$2,300 for each house built in the northeast. The fee is intended to offset the cost of building roads and waterlines and providing police and fire protection to the areas, said Andrew Bukovinsky, who co-chaired the subcommittee. Bukovinsky, a project manager for M-Engineering Inc. in Westerville, said the fee was set higher in the northeast because houses there are larger. The fees may raise the price of housing, Bukovinsky admitted, but he said developers on the subcommittee had an active hand in setting the fees.

The pay-as-you-grow subcommittee also recommended active use of tax increment financing districts in both areas. Tax increment financing districts take property taxes from an area and use the money to build infrastructure such as roads and sewers in that area.

The subcommittee also urged the city to set aside land for schools and parks. It noted similar plans are in place for the Hayden Run Road area on the northwest side. It recommended plans to control growth near Rickenbacker International Airport to the south and near the Big Darby Creek to the west.

The job growth subcommittee recommended the city use tax breaks and other tools to encourage businesses to locate in fast-growing areas. If the city allows those areas to fill up with housing, it will lose tax revenue and stretch its police and fire divisions, said co-chairwoman Sherry Pymer. The subcommittee recommended Columbus loosen its tax incentive policies, Pymer said. She said the city's tax breaks sometimes aren't big enough or available in enough areas to attract jobs.

Pymer, co-owner of Pymer Plastering Inc. in Columbus, said the city should try to think of itself as a business. That means focusing on providing quality, prompt service to its customers. Columbus should also consider tax breaks and incentives for buildings that are constructed in environmentally friendly ways, the subcommittee recommended.

The regional cooperation subcommittee submitted a code of conduct to discourage Central Ohio cities from luring businesses away from each other.

"True economic development does not consist of convincing existing Central Ohio businesses to transfer their operations to another part of the region," said Jose Luis Mas, a local lawyer who co-chaired the subcommittee.

The code would prevent communities from negotiating in secret to lure businesses away from other Central Ohio areas. It would not prevent businesses from moving around the area. If businesses do move, the code would require the new host community to donate a portion of its additional tax revenue to a Regional Growth Fund. Columbus and the neighboring communities will consider the code of conduct over the next few months, Mas said.

"It's going to have to be a good-faith effort," Mas said. "Hopefully, we'll keep each other honest."

The city last set out its growth policies in 1954, Coleman said. A growth spurt enlarged Columbus from 42 square miles to 225 square miles, but it also stressed the city's resources.

"Our policy in the past," he said, "has been to grow by any means necessary, no matter the costs, no matter the benefits."

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