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[IMPACT-FEE MORATORIUM]

Impact-Fee Moratorium: Don't Lose More Jobs in Polk

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Let us review, shall we? If not for the benefit of us all, then for the benefit of the Polk County commissioners are scheduled to consider removing impact fees on new construction for the next 12 months during today's County Commission meeting in an effort to stimulate the economy.

The building slowdown is not a local phenomenon. It is not only statewide, it is nationwide. New construction is among the least of anyone's concerns right now, be they in Bartow or Buffalo. June unemployment figures for Florida stood at 11.4 percent. Polk County was 12.5 percent.

Impact fees aren't stopping people from building homes. The economy is.

A glut of homes is already on the market. Since the beginning of 2009, nearly 15,000 homes have gone into foreclosure in Polk County. Last year accounted for nearly 11,000 of those foreclosures - the most since the county started keeping records in 2002.

So the county's answer to people trying to sell existing homes and rent empty office space is to make building new houses and new commercial space more attractive financially? Have commissioners really considered the consequences of an impact-fee moratorium?

An impact-fee reduction of 50 percent hasn't had an effect in Polk County. Reductions and elimination in other areas in and out of Florida haven't helped. Indeed, Polk County even states in the proposal to eliminate impact fees: "Prior actions by the Board of County Commissioners in reducing impact fees across the board by up to 50 percent have not produced the necessary economic stimulus."

Yet some commissioners seem to think if a 50 percent reduction has done no good, a 100 percent reduction will work.

What's the next step if this doesn't work, an impact-fee subsidy?

Polk County's impact fees are not excessive or out of line with those in other counties. The amounts may be higher or lower in some categories but, overall, the impact fees charged here are in line with those of other counties.

A moratorium on impact fees would result in the loss of an estimated $6.5 million. Supposedly the county is giving up this revenue in order to lower the prices of new homes and office buildings, but useful projects would be cut on the basis of a false premise.

IMPACT FEES FUND CONSTRUCTION JOBS

The $6.5 million is used to offset the costs of growth to existing residents. They don't need new roads, more deputies, jail space, park areas or libraries. That $6.5 million would be used to build those things, thereby creating jobs.

Indeed, county commissioners have already been told that if impact fees aren't coming in, road projects and other capital-improvement plans will be delayed.

So, in order to do away with impact fees - which has no proven history of stimulating the job market - the county is going to forgo revenue that would definitely create jobs in the building of roads and other growth-related needs. This seems to be another consequence to which commissioners have given little thought.

In addition, the commission hasn't said how it would to raise money to replace the revenue lost through the impact-fee moratorium. Would taxes on existing residents have to be raised again to fill the infrastructure hole that was made when Polk had no, or inadequate, impact fees?

Commissioners have no idea what will happen to Polk County's share of the state's sales tax revenue in coming months. The oil that spewed from BP's ruptured oil well for nearly 90 days resulted in millions of dollars in lost tourism that would have normally been generated by taxes on food, rooms, gasoline and other items.

Just how badly the county's pocketbook will be hit has yet to be determined. Even before that is known, however, the several commissioners are on the verge of approving a major cut in revenue.

There is something commissioners do know: They have reduced impact fees 50 percent in the past, and the only result has been a big loss in revenue to the county - and an increased burden on existing residents to pay for the cost of growth.

Commissioners can't predict what will happen with state revenue. But they do know the history of reducing impact fees.

Have they learned anything yet?

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