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[IMPACT-FEE MORATORIUM]

Impact-Fee Moratorium: Just Half a Dose of Hemlock

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The way Polk County Commission Chairman Bob English sees it, forcing taxpayers to take a half dose of hemlock is better than giving them a full dose.

At Wednesday's meeting, English - the swing vote on approving a yearlong moratorium on impact fees for new residential and commercial construction - offered a compromise to halve it to six months.

With a 3-2 vote, commissioners made it less costly to build new single-family homes, apartments and office space in a county that has a glut of homes in foreclosure and business centers with empty spaces.

The commission majority did so to "stimulate the economy" and "create jobs." They didn't offer examples of how moratoriums have done this in other Florida counties where they have been adopted - because such examples don't exist.

In fact, the commission admits that a 50 percent reduction in impact fees in Polk County that has been in existence hasn't worked. The solution, then, is to double up on what hasn't worked in the past.

A REVIEW IN NOVEMBER

So English, and Commissioners Sam Johnson and Ed Smith, went along with the six-month time frame instead of a year. It will be reviewed in three months to see if it should be extended beyond Jan. 31.

That review will be in November - the timing probably wasn't just happenstance. At least one of the two commissioners who voted against it will be gone from the commission (Randy Wilkinson is running for the congressional seat being vacated by Rep. Adam Putnam). The other moratorium opponent, Commissioner Jean Reed, will have an opponent in the November general election.

At least those two had sense enough not to buy into more of what hasn't worked in Polk County. And they questioned why the county should pass up revenue to offset the cost of growth from some big projects that will have a major impact on the county's roads and other needs.

"The timing is bad," said Commissioner Randy Wilkinson. He pointed out that CSX had already announced its plans to start what has been called "the mother of all rail yards" in Winter Haven, Legoland is starting the reconstruction of Cypress Gardens and there will be new dormitories constructed at the University of South Florida's Polytechic campus in Lakeland.

'WRONG THING TO DO FOR THE TAXPAYERS'

The three commissioners didn't seem concerned that by not collecting impact fees, the county would lose a projected \$6.5 million over a year's time.

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That money - which would have gone for road improvements, jails, emergency-medical services and parks - will have to be made up by taxpayers who are already here and are already paying for those services.

In addition, the majority of that loss would be for road projects. Thus, the county has placed its own construction projects - which would also create jobs - on the chopping block.

Specifically mentioned at the meeting were Kathleen Road improvements that could link to a new high-speed-rail station and the Bartow Northern Connector. That project would help ease traffic in and out of the proposed CSX rail yard.

Moreover, Deputy County Manager Jim Freeman pointed out that if the connector was delayed, that could cost the county an \$11 million state road grant.

That wasn't enough to dissuade passage. Nor did it seem to matter than those speaking against the moratorium outnumbered those in favor by 10 to 1.

"This is the wrong thing to do for the taxpayers," said Lake Alfred City Commissioner Nancy Daley during Wednesday's public hearing.

English disagreed: "We've all heard from people who are for and against this moratorium. They all have good arguments, and no one on the board is wrong for the way they vote on this issue."

To be sure: Just because that dose of hemlock didn't work to keep the patient alive the first time doesn't mean another dose won't work on the next.

A check of the patient's pulse in November might show that some commissioners used just a bit more logic than others about whether to administer more of the same.

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