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[IMPACT-FEE PROPOSAL]

Impact-Fee Proposal: Do Not Buy Into False Hope

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Polk County commissioners are scheduled to meet today with a consultant to discuss a possible doubling of school-impact fees for new residential and commercial construction.

Meanwhile, some of them want to impose a yearlong moratorium on collecting impact fees used to help pay for roads. Commissioners Sam Johnson and Ed Smith said the yearlong moratorium is needed to create jobs and stimulate the economy.

"A huge issue for me is the transformation of jobs in the county and the people who want to go back to work," said Johnson. "I think anything that we can do to remove a roadblock in the way of creating jobs and news businesses wanting to build here would be a positive."

The millions of dollars collected each year through impact fees are used to build roads to offset the growth brought here by new construction. Those jobs provide employment, too - but that's a side of the argument that doesn't advance the cause of Polk County home builders, so it doesn't get any attention.

Having lost a court battle to lessen school-impact fees, the builders now look to find sympathetic commissioners. Johnson and Smith appear to have soft hearts, so only one more vote is needed.

HAS IT WORKED IN OTHER COUNTIES?

Perhaps Commissioners Bob English, Jean Reed and Randy Wilkinson will at least stop to see what has happened when it was tried in other places.

Lifting impact fees to jump-start construction jobs was tried in Nassau County in late 2008. County Commissioner Mike Boyer didn't think it would change anything, but he supported it, hoping he'd be proved wrong.

After a year passed, and it came time to talk about an extension, Boyer observed: "I voted for this reduction the first time because I thought it had a chance of doing some good, even though I was skeptical of its success. I have not seen any evidence that it has been working here."

Reed said Highlands County is just finishing a yearlong moratorium on impact fees. She said she had been told by county officials there that it had no effect on construction.

One thing is clear: A moratorium will have a pronounced effect on the county budget: a loss of about \$6.5 million. Road projects would be delayed, said officials from the county's budget office.

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Moreover, Reed wondered if those losses wouldn't even be more substantial in the coming year: Would the new CSX terminal in Winter Haven, scheduled to begin early next year, be exempt from impact fees? Would Legoland not have to pay them when it starts construction at the former Cypress Gardens site?

Commissioners don't seem to want to speculate about the amounts that would be involved in those exemptions.

Other questions abound. The commissioners say they want to encourage more commercial construction. Yet how many thousands of square feet of office space and industrial warehousing sit vacant now? How many thousands of single-family homes and vacant apartments glut today's market? Is it a good idea to further discourage the sale or rental of those properties by giving a new single-family home a discount?

What guarantee will there be that the savings on the impact fee will be passed on to the buyer of the home or commercial building?

If money isn't set aside from impact fees to pay for needed road improvements, who will pay for them in the future?

The thousands of barrels of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico cannot be ignored either. Despite the "everything's fine at the beaches" ad campaign state tourism officials have launched, cancellations are already mounting. The state's budget is heavily dependent on tourism. The toppling domino in Tallahassee will ultimately have a crushing effect on the county's budget.

While commissioners might think they can easily forgo \$6.5 million in impact-fee income now, would declines in other revenue streams make that amount very attractive by this time next year?

There should be no moratorium passed until commissioners can provide answers to those questions. Doing so, however, will take some effort.

While all that's needed to satisfy Polk's builders is to say "yes," such an answer will not satisfy the builders' desires nor Polk County's needs without the clear truth provided by firm answers to the tough questions outlined.

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