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Local, state officials must tackle growth problems

WHILE IT'S necessary to make road improvements such as a planned \$12 million project to address growth-driven traffic woes around the town of Lexington, it's even more important for officials to do a better job of planning.

In short, they must make better decisions about growth, infrastructure and land use.

The high volume of traffic that jams the intersection of U.S. 378, U.S. 1 and S.C. 6 during peak times didn't materialize out of thin air. It's a result of a series of decisions by local government officials to allow commercial and residential development without ensuring that the road network could handle the inevitable increase in traffic.

That's not just a town of Lexington problem; it has happened and is happening across the Midlands, including other parts of Lexington County and in northwest and northeast Richland County. Traffic and road problems are such that planners have identified billions in projects they say are needed to bring relief.

But traffic congestion is only one of the problems that our communities grapple with as a result of poor planning and growth management. Poorly managed growth breeds sprawl, which causes pollution, eats up green space and places extreme pressure on not just roads but schools, water and sewer, and even fire and police protection.

Let's be clear. Growth in and of itself is not bad. As a matter of fact, it's necessary and desired. But it must be planned and guided. It makes no sense to allow unchecked growth that stretches infrastructure beyond capacity and creates service demands that are practically impossible to meet. The Midlands never will be able to afford all the road improvements planners say are necessary. All it can hope to do is make the most important improvements, so they *might* make a difference.

It's imperative that local elected officials — with help from the Legislature — devise ways to not only pay for needed infrastructure but also do a much better job of managing growth. Midlands leaders haven't always made sound decisions when it comes to land-use planning. And there has been a general failure to plan for water and sewer expansion to guide good growth. Oftentimes, the problem simply has been a failure by elected bodies to say "no" or "not yet" or "not that way."

Local governments are finding it harder and harder to fund necessary infrastructure as new developments bring more cars, more people and more schoolchildren, increasing the demand for services. Communities can't build new schools and improve roads and other services for each new residential development without either further burdening current taxpayers, adopting impact fees or requiring developers to pay for needed infrastructure. Why not do the obvious and place the burden — and the bill — on developers and new home buyers?

Legislators should give local governments a fighting chance by allowing impact fees to be used for any infrastructure that new subdivisions demand. That includes school construction, which is expensive and burdensome to existing property owners.

The impact fee is just the beginning. Local governments are struggling to provide basic services, from transit to police and fire protection; revenue sources are limited. Cities and counties depend primarily on the property tax — and a few stray sales taxes — and lawmakers have capped their authority to raise that.

Things have to change. Lawmakers must remove restrictions in state law that limit cities' and counties' ability to provide necessary services, and local officials must get much more serious about combating sprawl and unchecked growth. Our quality of life depends on it.