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September 22, 2005

Pay now, or later

Brevard's nearly \$1 billion budget meets many needs but lets other essentials go

Growth.

That, in a word, is what Brevard County is all about.

Just since 2000, 44,000 new residents -- roughly the population of Titusville -- have poured into our community.

Meeting the needs of the area's 520,000 people is a huge challenge, and it's why we believe the \$988 million budget approved Tuesday by the County Commission on a 3-2 vote is a sound spending plan.

Still, it's important to realize that while new homes and rising property values added \$25 million to the county's coffers, allowing an \$88 tax cut on a \$215,000 homestead, it comes at a high price:

A long list of needs can't be met, needs that only will increase in scope and soar in cost.

First, the good news.

The budget provides \$14 million for a desperately needed expansion of the Brevard County Jail, plus funding for more sheriff's deputies, expansions of library and park services, and money for some new roads.

But it fell short of covering a long to-do list, including:

- Expansion and improvements for the county's 40-year-old emergency operations center in Rockledge, the command post for hurricanes.
- Updating of the county's emergency radio communications system -- key in hurricane response and recovery.
- Repairs for the roofs of many county buildings, including the Titusville courthouse.



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- A \$300 million backlog on building new roads and upgrade others.

Commissioners are looking at extending the local option gas tax from 14 years to 20 years, which could raise \$45 million through bond issues.

It's a smart proposal that should be done.

But it would still leave the rest of the road projects unfunded while traffic gets worse and costs rise by the day.

That's why taxpayers are so ill-served by the continued refusal of Commissioners Ron Pritchard, Helen Voltz and Jackie Colon to boost the transportation impact fee on new-home construction.

Raising the fee to \$4,353 would lay some of the cost of growth on those who cause it, an approach strongly supported by the public.

Instead, the commissioners' refusal to OK the move puts more of growth's costs onto the backs of every taxpayer.

That the county's budget has reached nearly \$1 billion makes Brevard's increasingly urban makeup unmistakable.

This is no longer a sleepy coastal region. It's a fast-growing metropolitan area that requires a sophisticated, long-range view of civic requirements.

Instead, blind mantras by some commissioners against the transportation impact fee hike -- accompanied by unproven claims of major "budget fat" -- create a rising tide of trade-offs as the quality of life gets worse.

In the end, putting off what should be done now only means Brevard's taxpayers will have pay more later -- and that means you.

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