

Article published Mar 9, 2006

OUR OPINION

Remove impact fee roadblock

Raising impact fees invariably causes the Marion County Commission angst. It was so when the commission last increased them five years ago, and it is so today.

We understand. Nobody likes higher taxes, and impact fees are nothing but one-time taxes imposed to help offset the escalating costs of building more and better roads

necessitated by new growth. As it stands, Marion County is looking at an astounding \$1.3 billion in road construction and improvements over the next 20 years, and whatever decision is made today is likely to have lasting ramifications.

So we were hardly surprised Tuesday when county commissioners once again postponed voting on a new transportation impact fee schedule that would push the fee for a single-family home from \$2,112 to \$5,143. We're also glad they did.

What led to the postponement was the question of whether to give retirement communities a discount. As proposed, the impact fee on a new single-family residence in a certified retirement community would be \$1,769, or \$3,374 less than a single-family home elsewhere in Marion County.

Part of the commission debate centered on what qualifies as a retirement community.

But the real issue, we believe, is whether retirement communities warrant any discount at all. Commissioner Andy Kesselring and commission Chairman Jim Payton, who represents the retiree-rich State Road 200 corridor, questioned the validity of one study, by The Institute for Transportation Engineers, that suggests retirement communities generate only one-third the traffic of other neighborhoods.

Driven down SR 200 lately with the other 38,000 cars that travel it each day? And that number is set to jump by up to 40 percent when the new Market Street Mall opens, tentatively set for late next year. Kesselring has.

" . . . (W)here's our worst traffic?" he asked. "On State Road 200. And what's down there? Retirement communities. You can't convince me that they produce one-third of the traffic of single-family residences."

Discounting impact fees in retirement communities is political and fiscal foolishness. There is clear evidence developments that cater to retirees contribute measurably to our growing traffic woes.

Nor us.

Discounting impact fees in retirement communities is political and fiscal foolishness. There is clear evidence developments that cater to retirees contribute measurably to our growing traffic woes, not only directly but indirectly due to the increased service industry traffic they demand.

Marion County needs, again, \$1.3 billion worth of new and expanded roads over the next generation. The reason our road needs are so extensive is because our County Commission has been loathe in the past to make growth pay a reasonable share of its own way. Boosting the transportation impact fee to the proposed level will not generate even half of what is needed to pay the road tab that awaits.

It's easy to suggest that retirees are on the road less than working-age people, but the reality is many of those working people are on our roads because of the need to serve our retirement communities. It's a fact retirees are Marion County's single biggest industry and, according to University of Florida population projects, another 35,000 people over the age of 60 are expected to take up residence in Marion County before 2015. Tens of thousands of retired homeowners will have a tremendous impact on our roads, indisputably.

Payton and Kesselring had it right when they suggested doing away entirely with the retirement community designation in the ordinance and adopting one single-family residence impact fee for all neighborhoods. After all, the commission doesn't require an upcharge on the county fire assessments for retirees, despite numbers showing that nine in 10 calls are for rescue service and the busiest station in the county is, you guessed it, on SR 200.

Everyone in Marion County needs access to safe, navigable roads. That our county's highway fatality rate continues at a near-record pace year in and year out illustrates the desperate need for those roads.

Commissioners should set one impact fee rate for single-family residences countywide and get on with the business of tackling our billion-dollar road construction backlog. We'll all benefit, regardless of age or community.