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Spread the road-building burden

Roads and money, money and roads. An estimated \$1.3 billion in current and future needs to build and repair the roads in Manatee County. Impact fees alone cannot and never will carry the burden of an ever-growing population, not only in Manatee but throughout Florida.

Not only is growth spurring the demands, but increased tourism and growth in neighboring counties will continue to burden our road system locally. As we strive to find the answers for our local funding, what options do we have?

Discussion continues with Commissioner Amy Stein's recent FAST-CRAFT proposal. While I do not disagree with her approach to countywide traffic concerns, I wonder what other options may exist. Commissioner Stein's plan assumes the average single family homestead in Manatee County at a taxable value of \$128,000 would cost that taxpayer \$128 in additional property tax. The median home sales price in the county at present by her report is \$326,000 with an assumed taxable value of \$301,000 which translates to \$301 in additional tax to that homeowner. This report does not state any information on the impact to local business owners (who own their land) and/or investors and the impact to their non-homesteaded property. The FAST-CRAFT proposal simply taxes property owners throughout Manatee County an additional tax of \$1 per every \$1,000 of taxable valuation. It is estimated by Commissioner Stein's proposal that approximately \$26 million annually (without inflation factored) will be collected and used to pay off debt from a bond to literally fast-track road construction in our county. It is a plan that deserves attention and discussion by the citizens of Manatee County as do other potential options.

On Feb. 1, the Florida Impact Fee Review Task Force completed its review and submitted to the Governor, President of the Senate and Speaker of the House their final recommendations. While much information was contained in this report, two key issues were recommended. It was noted that authorizing passage of the local option sales tax by super majority vote of the Board of County Commissioners and authorizing all local governments to assess a documentary stamp surtax, similar to Miami-Dade County's 45 cents per \$100. Although no one likes to discuss any tax, an optional one-cent increase in the sales tax would raise approximately \$27 million annually (without inflation factored). This is based on information provided by Florida sales and tax return data for the fiscal year July through June 2005 as collected and reported for Manatee County.

This increased sales tax would be a burden shared not only by property owners in Manatee County, but every resident living in a rental unit and every tourist to our area. Tourism accounted for \$570 million in total sales in Manatee County in 2001, as reported in Manatee County Fiscal Year 2005-2006 budget. This means that tourism alone could generate \$5.7 million in additional revenue to enhance traffic flow in the county. For residents of Manatee County it is quite simple to estimate what your taxable purchases are annually. If you spend locally \$10,000 on taxable purchases, your additional tax burden would be \$100 per year.

Realtors and builders may disagree with the proposed documentary stamp surtax as driving up already high residential home sales closing costs. But again, this removes the burden solely on current county property owners and places this tax on all real estate sales that occur in Manatee County. According to information obtained from the Manatee County Property Appraiser's office, total value of real estate transactions in 2005 for Manatee County were \$7,364,003,338. With the additional documentary stamp surtax in place, over \$33 million in additional revenue would have been collected for local infrastructure.

If any combination of these proposals were used, over \$50 million annually in additional revenue could be generated for a bond issue to fast-track much-needed road construction. No state road projects beyond the three-year guaranteed reimbursement should be considered as we risk paying for state road construction with little to no hope of the state reimbursing the county.

The proposals made by the Impact Fee Review Committee must be presented to the state Legislature for approvals before it becomes reality. In the meantime, Commissioner Stein's Fast Craft deserves abundant attention. Let's hope the matter goes before the voters in a November general election and not a low-voter-turnout spring or special election.

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Commentary