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POSTED ON APRIL 26, 2006:

Stan's plan

A two-year, \$750 million school bond issue would buy time for Wake County-- and avoid the "b" word.

By **Bob Geary**

Last week, I wrote about the Raleigh City Council failing to raise impact fees very much. Wait a minute, you say. Didn't *The News & Observer* report that Raleigh's fees were going up 72 percent? Yes, but as one wag said, 72 percent more peanuts is still peanuts. Raleigh's fees were ultra-low, and the scheduled increase still leaves them mighty low, at about \$1,100 per new house. The developers are happy.

Before I leave this subject, I will simply note that Raleigh's fees can only be used--by state law-- for new roads and new parkland purchases. New parkland like the 310 acres at Dorothea Dix.

By blowing off Mayor Charles Meeker's suggested compromise of \$2,400 per house--slightly less than Cary's--the Raleigh Council's five-member majority in effect voted *not* to build up their parks money against the day when the state puts the Dix tract up for bid.

Ask developers to help pay for a grand Dix Park? Not Councilors Craven, Isley, Kekas, Taliaferro or West. Maybe they're thinking it should be the next *Cary Park* instead.

(With a lovely swim club, hopefully.)

There is a bright side to this gloomy news, however, and it is that Raleigh's obeisance to the developers leaves lots of room for a big ol' impact fee at the county level, where we desperately need it to build new schools. Loved the *N&O's* report on fast-growing Orlando, where the county government last year raised its impact fees for schools from about \$2,800 per new house to \$7,000.

Yes, that's \$7,000 per new residential unit, as compared to Wake County's current impact fee of zero.

("Zero." Dire Straits fans: Think "Creole.")

I got a note from a reader asking whether she'd heard correctly that Wake County is getting 68 new residents a day. Yes, it is, according to a report by County Manager David Cooke. What's even more stunning, on the average day, 27 acres of raw land is going into development. The county is averaging 1,000 building permits for residential units per month--12,000 new units a year.

You do the math. 12,000 units X \$7,000 = \$84 million a year that we could have for new schools. Which brings me to my friend Stan Norwalk.

Stan is pretty well known in Cary, where he's lived since retiring in 1994, for his strong opinions, copious research and prolific contributions to CaryPolitics.com, among other forums. He was pro-Glen Lang before and during Lang's time as mayor. Later, he was anti-Glen Lang. I cite this not as evidence of inconstancy, but the opposite: Stan likes to look at the facts and go where they take him. He's a smart-growth guy, for example, but he's no fan of the TTA rail project. He liked Lang's approach early on. Later, he thought Lang was going too far.

Anyway, when some of us in Raleigh got together to start WakeUp, a good-government group for the county, Stan jumped in with his Cary friends, grabbed the good-schools ball and ran with it. Why? Because his daughter's a schoolteacher (and was "Teacher of the Year" in Kansas City). Because good schools are his passion. And because he doesn't see how a county so obviously dependent on education for its economic health can ignore its school-crowding problem much longer. ("When I moved here [from New York], I was brought up short by all the classroom trailers," he recalls. "I thought it was just some sort of construction glitch.")

Stan's been out of the hustings ever since, talking to PTA groups and anyone else who'll listen, about how the county fell so far into a hole on school facilities and what the options are for digging ourselves out.

People ask me, since I'm the guy who wrote about it, what's happening with WakeUp? Two answers: It's getting organized, slowly but surely, and Stan Norwalk is moving at warp speed while others ponder our mission statements.

Good thing, too, that Stan is hustling, because the school-construction issue in Wake is coming up fast, and the alternatives don't look so hot the way he sees them--and I think he's right.

Norwalk's view--now I'll put my reporter's card in my hat--is that the Wake school board is letting itself be dragged into an empty argument about numbers instead of doing its job and

standing up for educational quality.

Who's dragging it? The Wake County commissioners, of course.

Here's the problem, as he sees it. The school board knows that it needs a hefty bond issue this year--one that starts with a "b," as in \$1.5 billion--to even get started catching up with the need for new schools, and for improvements to old schools, over the next four years. Over the next decade, some \$4 billion to \$5 billion will be needed.

But the Wake Commissioners have let it be known that they are not going to support a hefty bond, pointing to a poll taken for the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce which indicated that anything starting with a "b"--\$1.9 billion, \$1.5 billion, \$1.3 billion--would face tough sledding with voters.

That scares the commissioners, especially the Republicans, who hold a 5-2 majority today but are looking down the double barrel of a bad election year for the GOP (Bush) and the fact that all four seats up for election in November are theirs. They don't want to be fronting a big-b bond issue, too.

What a poll would say if the GOP commissioners suddenly got some brass ones and joined the school board in an all-out appeal for education as *thereason* for Wake County's golden growth, who knows? But since that's not happening, the school board's a-feared that it's going to have to get its bond issue passed with tepid support at best from the commissioners.

And meanwhile, two of the three commissioners seeking re-election, Tony Gurley and Phil Jeffreys, are pushing year-round schools as a cost-saving alternative to the big-b.

Jeffreys, in fact, has already staked himself out as opposed to any bond issue, arguing that year-rounds can buy the county four more years of putting it off.

Gurley, the current chair, doesn't go that far. But he does call Jeffreys' position "Plan B" in case whatever bond issue does go on the ballot gets defeated (hint, hint). Without any bond issue, and no property-tax hike either, the county can fund \$625 million in school construction over the next four years, Gurley notes.

So the school board seems on the verge of settling for a bond issue of \$900 million or so, combined with a commitment to make every new elementary school year-round and to convert the existing ones as quickly as possible.

Says Norwalk: "It's crazy." For one thing, he asks, why rush into year-round schools without a

serious study of what the unanticipated side effects would be? "I'm not against year-round schools," he adds. "We have them now. But I am against a massive move to all year-round schools without understanding what all the implications are. And I don't think the school board or [school] staff understands them."

More fundamentally, Norwalk objects to the school board letting the commissioners off the hook by asking for less than they know they need--than the schools need, that is. Let the commissioners cut the bond issue if they insist, he argues. Don't do their dirty work for them.

But here's a way out, Norwalk says. Take the \$1.5 billion that's needed over four years (or whatever the exact number is), and cut it in half. Ask the voters for \$750 million for two years, and "poof," that "emotional b-word barrier is gone."

Meanwhile, promise the voters that--during that time--you will make a serious study of the pros and cons of things like year-round schools, no-frills building designs, smaller classroom dimensions, and let's not forget, impact fees.

Yes, a \$750 million bond, spent that quickly, would result in a property tax increase of about \$90 million a year, Norwalk concedes, or \$200 for the folks living in a \$200,000 house. But that's true only for as long as the county does *not* go to the General Assembly and get itself a serious impact fee like Orlando's.

Or try to get one. Think the same developers who whined so much over Raleigh's little fee are going to let the General Assembly let Wake County charge them for real?

Not unless the Wake County Commissioners demand it, that's for sure.

Speaking of which, WakeUp--led by Norwalk--will hold a forum on how other counties pay for growth, with speakers from Franklin, Orange and Chatham counties so far, plus Wake Commissioner Jeffreys. It's May 26, 10 a.m., at the NCAE building in Raleigh. Norwalk's paper on the school-construction issue, and his PowerPoint presentation on how things got to be so bad in Wake County, can be found at www.WakeUpWakeCounty.com. *Citizen can be found at rjgeary@mac.com.*

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