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Stop Delaying On Impact Fees

A few weeks ago, a spokesman stood before the Hernando County Commission in Brooksville. He said, "We are for increasing impact fees to the highest level the law allows."

Some tree-hugger representative of the Sierra Club? A liberal view from the Audubon Society? A resolution being read by the Citizens Against Growth?

None of the above.

It was Bob Eaton, spokesman for the Hernando Builders Association, and chairman of the association's government affairs committee.

The association did not whine about how growth would turn stagnant if impact fees increased. Eaton, owner of Artistic Homes, did not say the fees would put him out of business.

If the association had said those things, it would have been parroting the Polk County Builders Association's line of reasoning.

Again, the Hernando Builders Association said: "We are for increasing impact fees to the highest level the law allows."

Eaton added that the association wanted some time to review the data the county used in coming up with proposed fees that were more than double the current \$4,798 that took effect just two years ago.

But the attitude was one of cooperation. "I come in peace," said Kirk Sorenson of Government Solutions at a public hearing three weeks ago. His company had been hired by the builders to examine the county's calculations.

While it was expected that Sorenson would attempt to have a second public hearing on the fees pushed back to July or further, he said the June 2 date set by the county would give him adequate time to review the figures.

At its current level of \$4,798, Hernando's impact fee is three times that of one adopted by Polk County. Now, Hernando is proposing an increase to \$10,042 for a single-family home.

Even before Polk County held a public hearing on a consultant's recommendation for school-impact fees, the County Commission voted to cut the amount from the \$3,801 recommended down to \$2,278 for a maximum amount.

When builders complained about that amount, commissioners cut it even more, down to \$1,607 --

58 percent less than the consultant said could be justified.

Commissioner Jack Myers, a real estate broker, thought even that amount was too high and wanted an impact fee of just \$1,200. (Myers and then-Commissioner Don Gifford voted against the \$1,607 impact fee; Neil Combee, Randy Wilkinson and the late Charles Richardson voted for it.)

While Polk's school-impact fee was finally approved -- and went into effect Sept. 1, 2003 -- more than two years has elapsed since the Polk County School Board first requested one. Between the time the School Board asked and the commission approved an impact fee, "more than 10,000 new permits [were] issued, representing new homes built, without any impact fee being collected," Frank O'Reilly, then chairman of the School Board, noted at the time. "Calculated at the impact fee recommended by the County Commissioners' own advisers of \$3,801 per home, that equates to \$38 million that could have already be at work helping to ease overcrowding at the schools serving those households."

Richardson, who died in office, said when he voted for the fee that it should be reviewed one year after it was in effect to make sure it was raising enough money to cover the impact of growth on schools.

Too bad Richardson isn't around to pester commissioners about his request. And it's sadder that commissioners have ignored Richardson's good advice.

The fee isn't raising enough money. Commissioners have been dragging their feet about revising the current one.

Meanwhile, other counties continue to move forward and deal with growth issues. Perhaps their elected officials realize that growth does not pay for itself -and unless it does, those who are already here will pay the bills.