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08/19/05

Hank Fishkind column

The high cost of our quality of life (part 2)

In our last column (published on Aug. 11), we talked about the linkage between our quality of life here in Florida and the need to make investments in our infrastructure to preserve that quality of life.

Historically, Florida has experienced rapid population growth that continues to this day. Approximately 170 new people move to Central Florida each day; statewide, the figure is about 1,000 new people per day.

It is obvious that we have not invested sufficiently in our infrastructure to support our existing population base, and this is reflected most obviously in our overcrowded roads and schools.

As we discussed last time, Florida's new growth management laws require that state and local governments invest in infrastructure so the existing population is properly supported with infrastructure and new growth pays for 100 percent of its costs as well.

The cost to bring our existing roadway systems up to standards will be about \$5 billion at the state level, with a down payment being made this year, and between \$40 billion and \$80 billion for county and city roadways, or about \$7,500 per household.

This is the bill for existing residents. New households have a cost of about \$10,000 per new home for roads. Some of this is paid from impact fees -- about \$5,000 in most jurisdictions -- with the balance coming from gas taxes and other taxes used for roads.

Schools are the next big-ticket item. Under the class-size amendment, local school boards will have to invest about \$30 billion to add classrooms to meet the new standards for existing residents. This is about \$3,700 per existing household.

New growth has to pay its own share as well. The cost to build a new classroom with its equipment and land ranges from \$15,000 for an elementary school station to as much as \$25,000 for a high school station. Translated into a cost per household, the cost before any credits is almost \$10,000 per new home.


Most jurisdictions in Florida charge impact fees for schools ranging from \$2,500 to as much as \$9,800 in Osceola County.

There is no doubt that it is becoming expensive to protect our quality of life here in Florida, but there is an obvious tradeoff at work. Either we can explicitly pay the costs to protect our quality

of life by investing in roads and schools and putting our fragile wetlands and critical habitats off limits to growth and development, or we can pay the costs implicitly.

If we do not invest in our infrastructure, if we do not protect our fragile resources, then we consume the very things that attracted us here in the first place. No investment does not mean no cost. It just means lower quality of life. Unfortunately, there are no free lunches.

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