

February 3, 2006

Can't run, can't hide

Time for County Commissioners to face up to costs of needed local roads

Here's where the rubber hits the road -- literally.

After years of dawdling by the Brevard County Commission, including the refusal of Commissioners Ron Pritchard, Helen Voltz and Jackie Colon to make difficult decisions required to pay for growth, the county is facing a deadline.

Under pressure of state law, commissioners Tuesday started to hash out ways to prioritize and fund \$360 million in road needs.

If they don't deliver a plan by December 2007, Brevard faces a building moratorium.

In other words, the county will have to tell property owners they can't build -- a legally indefensible position that could lead to lawsuits, says County Manager Peggy Busacca.

We, and much of the public, have long pushed for fiscally responsible ways to address the costs of development, including road construction demanded by the Godzilla of increasing sprawl.

The commission could have passed or supported solutions including higher transportation impact fees on new construction, boosting the local sales tax or the local-option gas tax, or a workable combination of those.

Instead, the trio that makes up the commission's majority, eager to please their pro-development supporters, has refused to raise the transportation impact fee to the recommended \$4,353 per new house.

The commissioners should take that badly needed first step immediately. It would show they finally hear voters' demands that new growth pay at least some of the costs it creates.

But even if the fee increase is OK'd, adding \$15 million or more to per year, hundreds of millions more are needed.

That means the other options are back on the table, and if some commissioners don't like the idea, they can blame themselves for ignoring these needs in the past.

For instance:

- Last years' idea of raising local option gas taxes to pay for roads went nowhere.

- In 2003, Pritchard and Colon opposed a 1 cent local sales tax hike for local improvements, including roads. The measure was soundly defeated at the polls, with voters saying they wanted impact fees exhausted first.

That hasn't happened, and now fed-up citizens are taking matters into their own hands.

One example is a grass-roots revolt called Save Brevard.

The organization is proposing two Brevard County Charter amendments, one of which would stop new construction if it pushes any factor making up the quality of life -- including roads -- beyond recommended capacity.

At that point, to get building permits, the development would have to pay its share of the infrastructure and service costs it generates.

Details of the proposal need more study. But if Save Brevard's amendments went before the public today, we wouldn't be surprised if they passed.

That should be a warning to the commission:

The public has had enough with growth policies that aren't strictly enforced and commissioners afraid to make the tough choices on paying for rapid development.

Time has caught up with them, and they can't run and hide anymore.
