

Low impact fees left costs of infrastructure unpaid

By BERNIE LEVEN

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Much has been said, and many opinions have been offered regarding the increase in impact fees that will come before the County Commission on Thursday. There are two ways to fund our county budget: millage, through property taxes, and impact fees. Special taxing districts are set up for the users of services that receive the benefit, and are not part of the overall equation. In other words, who should pay for growth, the people moving into our county or the current residents?

Taxpayers desire to pass these costs along to the newcomers to keep the millage lower. After all, many people who moved to our county for the lower taxes are on fixed incomes and would be hurt by substantial millage increases. The development community desires lower impact fees to promote their sales and increase their profitability.

When our county impact fees were among the lowest in the state, it promoted growth. Our infrastructure did not grow at an equivalent rate. This creates not only present-day problems, but will have effects for years to come.

Now that consultants propose the higher impact fees, the development community is outraged that growth may be curbed while our infrastructure catches up. The development community does not understand that the pendulum swings, and it is time to pay the piper.

When our impact fees were among the lowest in the state, did anyone from the development community approach our commission and say that our infrastructure is lagging so we must raise the impact fees to address these needs? This did not occur, of course, even with the realization that a strong infrastructure would promote long-term stability and economic benefits through controlled growth. Let us line our pockets today, and not consider the future. Greed ruled the day.

Let us examine the argument that higher impact fees will cripple our local economy. I challenge any member of the development community to come forward with one case in point where the local economy has been crippled because of higher impact fees. No one has been able to do this, because there is not one factual case on record, anywhere. It is a fact that Collier County has impact fees in excess of \$30,000, and enjoys one of the highest growth rates in Florida. This is a legitimate example, and makes it tougher to buy into the theory our local economy will be crippled by higher impact fees.

Having resided in Citrus Springs for nearly three years, I am familiar with the building boom. My home was the first on my street, and over a dozen homes have since been built within a two-block radius of my home by various contractors. I have witnessed survey crews from Ocala, and land cleared by men from Levy County. I have seen slabs poured by crews from Brooksville, and block erected by crews from Pasco and Pinellas counties. Electricians arrive from Marion County at times. While some local subcontractors are used for plumbing and roofing, the license plates on many of their vehicles are from Sumter or Hernando counties.

There is a definite trend here. While the contractors' money remains here, a good portion of the construction dollars are being paid to support the economy of surrounding counties. Yet our 3.9 percent unemployment rate is one of the highest in Florida. Farming out jobs while voicing concerns about the local economy is an inconsistent argument.

Another comparison has been made of impact fees from counties with similar population to Citrus County. This comparison of apples to oranges is not valid. The comparison must be made to like counties that are in similar stages of infrastructure development, not population.

Citrus County is unusual in that it has seven rivers, a major body of water (the Gulf of Mexico), and a large chain of inland lakes. This blend creates an infrastructure nightmare for our environmentally sensitive areas. Addressing our infrastructure problems must be done now to preserve our water and natural resources for today, and generations to come.

The construction of a new power plant in Levy County will also have an adverse effect on the tax structure of Citrus County. Our neighbors to the north will soon reap the benefits of higher tax revenues the new plant will provide. What was once 30 percent of our budget is now 15 percent, and will diminish more in the years ahead.

This will make funding our budget, and budgetary controls, a much more creative process in the years and decades ahead than it has been the previous three decades. Higher impact fees will be needed to displace the revenues lost from the power plant. Higher impact fees must be part of the equation in the long-term planning process to compensate this future loss of revenue.

Last year, during the election cycle, I proposed two exceptions to the current impact fee proposal. The first was for medical professionals and related services. Citrus County has the second-highest average age in the state, and highest percent of veteran population in the state. Our senior citizens and veterans should not have to drive to other areas for quality medical care. It is their right, and the right of all our citizens to have quality medical facilities in the area.

I also proposed a partial exemption for small-business owners that want to expand or start new businesses within Citrus County. The American dream of small-business ownership is becoming endangered in today's society. I was pleased to see that Commissioner Dennis Damato has followed my lead and come out with a similar proposal recently addressing these two critical areas.

Impact fees need to be raised to a level that will address our present infrastructure needs, and the needs of the future. A reasonable increase on the higher side of the spectrum would address these issues, and help compensate for the inadequacies of the past.

The development community must realize that as the pendulum swings, the financing of our infrastructure is of paramount importance without cutting back our current level of service. With an adequate infrastructure in place, everyone is a winner.

When this goal is reached, impact fees can be lowered. It is nice to have one's cake and eat it too, but that option is not on the menu if we are to realize the vision that has made Citrus County someplace special, and will continue to be that special place for decades to come.

Bernie Leven is a Citrus Springs resident and former candidate for County Commission. Guest columnists write their views on subjects that they choose, which do not necessarily reflect those of this newspaper.

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