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[PARKING LOT POLITICS]

Dazzle 'em With Big Trucks

If you have a weak argument, dazzle 'em with construction trucks and utility trailers. As an added benefit, those dazzlers will take up spaces in the parking lot of the Neil Combee Administration Building in Bartow.

That way, it will be harder for opponents of slashing county impact fees by half on new residential construction to speak out against it.

That's exactly the strategy of the Polk County Builders Association for today's 1:30 p.m. hearing on Commissioner Jack Myers' proposal to cut impact fees by about \$3,700 a house - a cut Myers' believes will get the local economy going.

In an effort to block opponents, the PCBA has been circulating an "Important Notice" to members: "If you have a truck or construction vehicle, please park in front of the north side of the Administration Building (330 W. Church Street, Bartow) between 6:00 - 6:30 a.m. the morning of Feb. 20th."

That is a full 7 1/2 hours before the public hearing begins. Even if opponents get there "early" to get a place to park, they'll be too late.

The notice urged members to bring "trucks and equipment," noting that "smaller vehicles will be parked in the lot directly in front of the north entrance to the building. Larger vehicles will be parked in [the] parking lot directly across the street." **FREE LUNCH AS WELL** The PCBA already has a plan when the parking lot is full - but more of their members want to attend the meeting: "If you have trouble finding a parking space, please go to the Lowe's parking lot, east end. ... Bus transportation will be there to take you to and from the event."

And the PCBA really wants their members in the parking lot. Proclaimed a related flyer: "FREE LUNCH. 11:30 a.m., Feb. 20th."

Indeed, lunch should be free. Myers has already taken the PCBA's "this will help save our jobs" bait, so the builders only need two more votes to save themselves an estimated \$20 million a year. That is the money Polk County will lose that could be used to offset the cost of building roads and making other improvements needed for growth.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that any of the impact-fee reduction would be passed on to home

buyers.

While some commissioners have tried to paint the possible reduction as an effort to kick-start the county's sagging housing market, this issue is about as local as the Interstate Highway System is a local road.

Here's what the February issue of Professional Builder says about impact fees: "To arms, home builders of America! ... While the current housing slowdown is causing agony for home builders, it does have one silver lining: *the opportunity to reshape the political landscape and cut impact fees in all the states and housing markets where they are now most prevalent* [emphasis added]." **HOUSING INDUSTRY ALREADY HELPED** While Myers says the impact-fee cut would only be for a year, the builders have a more ambitious goal: "to reshape the political landscape" and reduce fees not only drastically, but long term as well.

If impact fees are cut, good luck ever getting them raised after a year. Polk County was late adopting impact fees when they were needed, which is one of the reasons it faces a multimillion-dollar infrastructure deficit now.

As noted in this space Sunday, the housing industry has already been given help since Myers proposed cutting the impact fee. The Federal Reserve Board has dropped interest rates by more than 1 percent, making home mortgages more affordable for buyers.

Also since Myers proposed forgoing county revenue in favor of helping builders, voters passed Amendment 1, which will reduce property-tax collections for local governments, including Polk. County officials said the loss to Polk could be \$20 million, but a more exact figure won't be known until May.

It will only take the vote of two more commissioners - Bob English, Jean Reed, Sam Johnson or Randy Wilkinson - to pass the proposed cuts.

For a \$20 million savings, no wonder the PCBA is offering a free lunch for their members.

Perhaps, for the benefit of Polk's existing taxpayers, three commissioners will see the obvious: When it comes to paying for the costs of growth, there is no free lunch.