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Lois Henry

Lois Henry: Developers have had the wheel long enough

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Col. Thomas Baker was many things -- founder of Bakersfield, a highly-regarded lawyer, generous soul to travelers and neighbors alike, a surveyor, and, oh yes, a civil engineer.

As such, he liked a good road system. In fact, he was a stickler for it. As the original planner of Bakersfield's roads system, he designated streets here would be 82 feet wide rather than the standard 66 feet of the day.

He wanted people to be able to get around.

What would he think of Bakersfield's now snarled system of bottlenecked thoroughfares, hodge podge developments connected by single-lane farm roads and, of course, our intermittent freeways?

Who cares?! The man's been dead since 1872. Let him rest, for Pete's sake. The real question is what are we going to do about it?

Here's an idea: Those who put an extra burden on the system by building housing subdivisions should help ease that burden by paying a fee toward traffic improvements from the profits they'll reap from that very subdivision.

That's fair and appropriate. The only issue after that is how much.

In Bakersfield, as numerous people have said since the traffic fee was instituted in 1992, ours has been way too low for far too long largely because of political pressure from developers.

That -- and politicians' undying inability to say no, or even not yet, to any development that comes down the pike -- has led to our current infrastructure mess, in which we are \$3 billion behind, by some estimates.

I was thinking of doing a column examining what Bakersfield would be like without any government regulation (some say interference) at all. What if housing were totally "market driven" and developers completely unfettered?

Ha! Look around. That's exactly where we are -- a sprawling mess.

In the last general plan update, city planners had hoped to make sense of the ever outward spiraling building boom by creating "city hubs," areas of commercial, light industrial, retail, etc., so there might be some reasonable flow to traffic. Even allow for (gasp) public transit.

Developers blew past that so fast it wasn't even a blur in their rear-view mirrors.

A friend recently told me Oildale now seems quaint to her in comparison with what's happened to the Rosedale "community." Not much community among the unending housing subdivisions slashed here and there by clogged arterials where motorists jerk along as people scoot in and out of strip malls that spring up haphazardly along the way.

And truth be told, if we were still in boom times, I doubt developers would have sued the city and county over bumping the traffic impact fee from about \$6,000 per single family home to over \$12,800.

By the by, even with the traffic impact fee increase, Bakersfield's overall fees (\$25,000 for everything including sewer connection, parks, habitat conservation and schools, which is determined by the state, not the city) are about middle of the road compared to other cities.

The boom went bust, however, and now developers are pulling out all the stops, from suing to suggesting a builder "bailout" by having the city drop its fees.

Other cities have done so in an effort to stimulate the construction industry, which is flat out foolish.

It leaves those cities wide open to California Environmental Quality Act-based lawsuits. The fees are supposed to help lessen impacts from development. Dropping them doesn't negate the impacts, so approving the developments would immediately put the city at odds with CEQA.

"It's just silly to subsidize developers," agreed Gordon Nipp, who represents the local Kern-Kaweah Chapter of the Sierra Club. "It's the same sort of boosterism that led us to sprawl to the horizon and caused the traffic problems we have now."

If government wants to subsidize jobs, he suggested just do it directly and pay for those who've been laid off to get education and retraining.

Besides, developers can't get anyone to buy the half-finished subdivisions already collecting dust all around town. Taxpayers certainly don't need to help fund more such ruins.

As Col. Baker understood, city representatives have an obligation to provide a safe, well-run environment for all their citizens, not just the ones who fill their campaign coffers.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenry@bakersfield.com