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School Board gives up impact fees, with nothing in return

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COMMENTARY

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How much?

That was what the Lake County Commission demanded to know last month.

The School Board had passed along a new study showing that the impact fee on new homes should be \$10,292. That's the amount it costs the school district, on average, to provide for new students each time a home is built in Lake.

Commissioners, who have the power to impose the fee, simply wanted to know whether the School Board wanted to impose it and collect it or collect only part of it.

But by the time the issue boomeranged backed to the School Board on Feb. 27, the question was very different: Will you support continuing a moratorium on collecting impact fees?

In a twinkling, five School Board members who ceaselessly howl that they desperately need construction money to relieve overcrowded schools voted to leave what probably will total \$6 million on the table in exchange for, um, nothing.

Exactly how did that happen? The answer is that County Commission Chairwoman Leslie Campione outwitted them, plain and simple.

She told them she'd like both boards to begin working seriously on the question of how to pay for schools through a committee, and they courageously demanded a voting seat on the committee. She agreed. They voted her way. Some of them said later that they did it because they believed the County Commission wouldn't collect the fees anyway.

If they'd given her 10 more minutes, Campione could have reversed 15 years of public policy on impact fees and built a bridge over Lake Dora using only four toothpicks, a yard of twine and a half a tube of Super Glue.

No elected officials like to impose impact fees because builders, who contribute heavily to their campaigns, despise the fees. They'd rather sell more homes and let taxpayers who live here now take care of the cost of growth. And remember that this is an election year.

So county commissioners clearly aren't enthusiastic about annoying potential contributors to the point of rage. After all, the county hasn't been collecting the fees for 15 months, and the moratorium was due to expire. It was important to keep the moratorium going.

But did they really mean to change the conversation dramatically enough to send the county on what clearly is a path to reduce or eliminate impact fees and reject the notion that that growth should pay for itself?

"I guess I admit that I framed the question that way," said Campione, when asked about the change.

"I did it to get these two boards together. The School Board was looking for a solution but not putting anything on the table. I don't know if it really was that big a leap."

Ah, those dulcet tones of the lawyer, lulling us all into compromise.

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The advertisement is a rectangular banner with a red top section containing the text "America's #1 Vacation Specialist" in white. Below this is a blue section with a white cruise ship. A red starburst graphic on the right says "Don't miss out on our great deals!". The text "Legendary Journeys" is written in a cursive font across the ship. At the bottom, a dark blue bar contains the text "CLICK HERE NOW for Today's Specials" in white.

Unfortunately, there are a few holes in Campione's logic.

For starters, since when does the School Board have to "put something on the table," let alone a year's worth of impact fees probably worth \$6 million, to get basic cooperation out of the County Commission?

And second, the committee Campione was suggesting already exists. School Board members should have done a little checking before calling commandingly for a voting seat on such a committee. That's because they already have a voting member on the committee. It is Carol MacLeod, the chief of finance.

So, School Board members gave up \$6 million during this charade and got bupkis. Brilliant.

Campione said she will suggest that the committee discuss imposing and spending impact fees in zones rather than countywide or setting some sort of threshold that would trigger the collections.

County Commissioner Jimmy Conner, a former School Board member, said he sees through that strategy: "They're going to try to impose a half-mill tax and eliminate impact fees entirely. I think the public will revolt."

Campione said that's not the case — impact fees have a place in the mix of how to fund schools. But here's a prediction that the role of impact fees will be reduced significantly, and taxpayers will be picking up more of the tab.

Both Campione and the School Board whined about the condition of the economy and mindlessly accepted the theory that few people would have built homes if the county were collecting the fees. Since when do boards base votes on speculation? The idea that people will make the house a bit smaller or less ostentatious if they really want to build is equally valid.

No one asked for a scrap of evidence backing up the theory that building would have dried up if the \$6.5 million in impact fees had been collected on houses built in the last 15 months. Never mind that the school district just spent \$98,000 on a study pinning down the true cost of growth because builders would rip the fee to pieces in court if they didn't.

School Board, your job is to provide schools — not to stimulate the economy, not to make your development contributors deliriously happy and not to base your votes on what you *think* the County Commission might do in the future.

Stop this nonsense. If you need money for school construction, stand up and say it. If you don't, go away. This shilly-shallying is tiresome.

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