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[POLK COUNTY IMPACT FEE]

Man Bites Dog!

Mark Feb. 20, 2008, down on the calendar - the day the Polk County

Commission finally told Polk County Builders Association members that, this time, they weren't going to have it their way.

A "Man Bites Dog!" moment in Bartow.

It wasn't just that the movement to cut county impact fees in half - the Holy Grail for local builders and their cure-all elixir for what ails the housing market - didn't pass. It didn't even draw first breath.

Commissioner Jack Myers' motion for a one-year reprieve didn't get a second. The \$3,700 cut in what builders pay for new home impact fees would have eliminated an estimated \$18.3 million from the county's effort to deal with growth.

Dead silence.

Not content to let his ill-conceived idea twist slowly in the wind, Myers took another run at carrying the PCBA's water bucket: He proposed cutting impact fees by 25 percent instead.

In truth, if it looked like doing it would really boost home construction and "Save Our Jobs" as the PCBA claimed, we've no doubt the commissioners would have done it. But not only did they have good reasons not to, two local economists said cutting impact fees would have negligible effect. backlog of existing homes Even the 50 percent cut "would not have a dramatic impact," said Gordon Kettle, economic consultant to the Central Florida Development Council. Moreover, Polk had a backlog of 5,200 existing homes for sale in December. But that same month, only 1 in 20 sold. At that rate, that stack of homes would last more than a year and a half. "There's no easy-button answer," Kettle said. "It won't restore the housing industry to what it was."

Myers' 25 percent offer was still standing, but only weakly. Commission Chairman Sam Johnson turned over the gavel to a fellow commissioner so he could second Myers' motion.

In the end, the two stood alone against three who had the courage to say that the costs of growth had been shoved off on existing homeowners long enough before Polk finally adopted realistic impact fees. They weren't going to back away now.

Commissioners Bob English, Jean Reed and Randy Wilkinson earned a year's pay in one day

Tuesday by doing what they were elected to do: Make the hard decisions needed on issues affecting the quality of life in Polk County.

The PCBA members filled the room - and the parking lot - urging members to arrive at 6 a.m. the day of the hearing with "trucks and equipment" as a show of support. Opponents of the impact-fee cut said the "park-in" was an effort to stifle public comment, an assertion PCBA Executive Director Scott Coloumbe called a lie. He told commissioners to start the public hearing by listening to the opponents to show that all had a chance to speak.

Maybe he was trying to make up for his earlier comment regarding parking: "If people are inconvenienced for a day, sorry about that." FIRE STATIONS, ROADS DELAYED Sadly, no commissioner asked County Manager Mike Herr to recite the list of projects that would be either delayed or curtailed by the impact-fee cut. "I didn't want to put him on the spot," Myers told The Tampa Tribune when asked why he wouldn't ask Herr for a recommendation publicly after meeting privately with Herr.

Myers didn't want to hear - or want others to hear - the staff report: The second phase of the widening of County Road 540A would be halted. Portions of Berkley Road, County Line Road and Kathleen Road would not be widened.

Three proposed fire stations would be placed on the back burner. The purchase of park land would be delayed. Computers would not be added to libraries.

Commissioners English, Reed and Wilkinson already knew. The 3-2 vote against Myers' consolation prize for the PCBA was a step back for the organization.

But it was a giant step forward for a County Commission that just five years ago chopped \$2,200 - 58 percent - off a school impact fee because the PCBA didn't like the amount the consultant said was needed to offset the costs of growth.

The commission's face may be changing now. It will change more this fall, when Myers will be unable to seek re-election because of term limits and Johnson will be up for re-election. Perhaps voters will remember who seconded the motion to delay their road improvements, park purchases and fire stations.

After Wednesday's pitiful showing, don't let the door hit you on the way out.
