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Editorial

Impact fees put the cost of growth where it belongs

Impact fees are fair and they make sense.

The Winnebago County Board has an opportunity tonight to do the fair, common-sense thing by approving a resolution to charge impact fees on new home construction in unincorporated Winnebago County.

It's not as if the county would be going out on a limb in approving impact fees. Boone County paved the way for the region a decade ago.

IMPACT FEES IN Boone didn't stop developers who wanted to build or new residents who wanted to move there. In subsequent years, Boone became one of the state's fastest-growing counties.

In response to rapid home growth and growing demand on schools, Roscoe followed Boone County's example on impact fees about two years ago.

In both cases, the influx of new residents caused additional demands on schools and infrastructure. Impact fees put some of the cost of growth where it belonged -- on people who created the increased demand -- and decreased the burden on existing property owners.

The fee structure proposed for Winnebago County is reasonable, if not on the low side. The fees, based on home size, are significantly lower than those imposed in Boone County or Roscoe.

Winnebago County Board Chairman Scott Christiansen favors impact fees, and he is the one bringing the resolution before the board. He was a hard sell on this issue. He opposed impact fees as recently as August, but he became a believer after studying the issue.

IMPACT FEES are a one-time cost to people who buy new homes. The fees are not factored into the home value, and so, they don't raise the property tax for the home or for existing properties nearby.

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The argument that they hurt the construction industry hasn't proven to be the case here.

Meanwhile, the need is obvious. Impact fees can only be used to pay for school construction or land acquisition for a new facility or expansion. That means the money is directly applied to offset the costs most clearly associated with growth -- the stress on schools.

IN CONJUNCTION with the impact-fee resolution, Christiansen will ask the board for a green light to lobby state lawmakers for a change in the school funding formula, which he believes is a big part of the widespread financial crisis among school districts.

Voting on that will be the easy part of the evening for County Board members. The sticking point may be impact fees, which are inevitable and the wave of the future. We hope the County Board will embrace it.



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