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COMMENTARY LAKEFRONT

## Those cashing in on growth must pay for it

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COMMENTARY

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Lake County commissioners in the coming weeks are going to get a recommendation from the School Board to double the impact fee on a new house from \$7,055 to \$14,646.

That's a sickening amount for the privilege of building a home. It's a kick to the building industry, which is in a horrible slump now. It's almost un-American.

Too bad it has to be done.

Lake County is next to last in per-pupil funding in Florida, which in turn ranks No. 45 in the nation on student spending.

The scalding truth is we don't value education as much as folks do elsewhere. People spend on what they care about. And education is like anything else -- if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys.

In the coming weeks, the home-building industry is going to apply enormous pressure using bogus arguments to persuade Lake commissioners to reject the fee raise.

Among their whines is that the study setting the amount of the fee is flawed and that economic Armageddon is imminent if the higher fee is imposed.

None of these studies is perfect. This one has been under way for two years, which slightly changes some of the data -- but not enough to matter. It was done by an experienced company that recently recommended that Osceola County lower its fee. Clearly, the firm is not out to "get" developers.

Home builders are, indeed, hurting, along with tradespeople who earn modest salaries. It's because their greedy bosses overbuilt the market and now illogically demand relief.

But howls of impending economic doom from impact fees are overblown. Builders said the same thing in 1991 when school-impact fees first were imposed and again in 2004 when they were raised. Everyone knows the result.

Developers are right, however, that Lake County's sole industry is residential growth. Unfortunately, that won't sustain a healthy economy. If they really cared, they would be leaning on commissioners to diversify the business base.

Instead, builders propose to divide the county into districts and let voters in them decide whether to build new schools and how much tax to levy. It is hard not to laugh. What a delightful solution for developers! Residents pay for growth,



and builders keep making exorbitant profits!

This self-serving plan arrived Thursday in my e-mail from Don Magruder, general manager at Ro-Mac Lumber & Supply.

The day before, he railed in another e-mail that his daughter, a Leesburg High junior, waited for 20 minutes with nearly 900 other kids to get lunch in a cafeteria built to handle 499. He called it "stupid planning." Apparently Magruder doesn't know that the state limits the size of cafeterias based on school capacity.

Can this be the first time Magruder personally has tasted the type of trouble that out-of-control growth can cause?

This is what it's all about: lunch at 10:30 a.m.; running from portable to portable in the rain; not being offered classes in German, art or music theory.

Magruder and his colleagues don't want to take responsibility for growth, but also they don't want their children to suffer. You should fix the problem for them -- by paying.

Magruder is the author of an essay on the Ro-mac Web site titled "Growth Has Been Good For Lake County." It should have been called "Growth Has Been Good for Me and my Buddies."

The breathtaking hypocrisy shouldn't distract county commissioners from the critical question: Who should pay for the effects of growth? Us? Or the people who bring it here?

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