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## City, county shun well-used way to help parks

MARY NEWSOM

If you believe in parks ...

If you believe in greenways ...

If you believe in the need for public playing fields for baseball, soccer, tennis and other sports ...

If you believe that in a city everyone, regardless of income, needs access to natural places ...

Then what I'm about to tell you may tick you off.

For years an easy remedy has been available to Charlotte City Council and Mecklenburg County commissioners that could bring in millions of dollars for parks, or hundreds of acres of parkland, or both.

But neither city nor county government has ever proposed using this measure. And so far, no one has given a very good answer why not.

Here's what I'm talking about: The county or the city could, through the city-county subdivision ordinance, require developers to either dedicate land or pay a fee, pegged to the number of subdivision lots they develop.

It's akin to an impact fee, but it has one key difference -- it doesn't need the N.C. legislature's approval. In the past 20 years legislators have not wanted to OK any impact fees.

But this parks measure is in the state enabling law for subdivisions. Many cities and counties statewide already use it, among them Monroe, Lincolnton, Kannapolis, Belmont and Cornelius.

Would such a provision, alone, eliminate Mecklenburg's giant backlog of park needs? Of course not. But that's not good reason to ignore the potential for millions.

### Millions already spent

Taxpayers have already spent many millions, as the county tries to buy park land before development blankets Mecklenburg. Since 2000, says finance director Dena Diorio, Mecklenburg has spent \$149.5 million from land bonds to buy park land. In addition, voters in 1999 OK'd \$52 million in park and rec bonds, and in 2004 another \$69 million. A \$35.6 million land bond on the Nov. 6 ballot will include \$34 million for parks. County property taxpayers foot the bill for all those bonds. Wake County (the county Raleigh's in) is one of many N.C. locales that require developers to pay fees or dedicate land for parks. I used Wake as a model for some rough calculations. Wake requires developers to set aside one thirty-fifth of an acre per subdivision lot, or pay a fee equal to the land's tax value.

What would it mean here?

In 2005, in Charlotte and unincorporated Mecklenburg, 2,408 subdivision lots were OK'd. If we used Wake's formula, that would have meant 68.8 acres donated for parks.

To translate that into dollars, I estimated an average value of \$35,000 an acre -- land values vary widely, but that's in the general ballpark for subdivision land. So fees instead of land for those 68.8 acres would total \$2.4 million. For one year.

Diorio said the county's average annual debt service on land bonds used for parks was \$7.5 million, so \$2.4 million a year might pay about a third of that.

Staff members I've queried either aren't aware the measure is available -- why not? -- or say it's just never been proposed.

County commissioners' chair Jennifer Roberts didn't know about it, either. "I'd be interested to hear

more," she said.

Robert Patterson, who chaired the advisory Park and Recreation Commission for four years until July 1, said, "It's news to me."

**Not talked about here**

County Park and Recreation Director Jim Garges, who arrived this year from Cincinnati, saw such measures at work in Ohio. "It can be a good tool for communities," he said. With land acquisition his department's No. 1 priority, he said, "It's kind of interesting that it hasn't been in the conversation."

Of course, with our maze-like local government, the county runs the parks department while the city oversees most subdivision approvals.

Some city planners know the recreation fee option exists. Yet while the planning department is writing new policies to try to link growth to infrastructure needs, its proposed policies don't mention the possibility of requiring developers to donate for parks.

I think that's irresponsible.

As of today, city and county elected officials can no longer plead ignorance.

If they care about parks -- heck, if they care about property tax burdens -- they should put their heads together at once and figure out how to get such a provision enacted here.

URBAN OUTLOOK Mary

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