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Impact Fees Aren't Polk's Problem

Listen to Polk County Commissioner Jack Myers moan and groan long enough and

one would think that the county's impact fees on new residential and commercial construction are dragging down the economy of the entire nation.

"[New starts on] Houses are down, [revenues from] impact fees are down," said Myers. "We've collected half of the impact fees we've budgeted."

It's those dadblasted high impact fees that have caused the slowdown in Polk County, said Myers, who probably also blames them for causing cancer in mice and other evils.

That, of course, is a leap of logic unsupported by any evidence. But so, too, was the commission's reasoning in voting unanimously to cut the impact fees for economic development and work-force housing.

Might it be more logical to assume that the slowdown in the housing market nationwide has something to do with the decline in construction and the drop in market value on some existing homes here? Add to that the collapse of subprime lenders, toss in an increase in the foreclosure rate, spread them around the country, and the local housing industry begins to be a mirror image of other parts of the state and nation.

At least the disconnect wasn't lost on Commissioner Randy Wilkinson. Although he supported the cuts, he was doubtful of Myers' depiction of impact fees as the root of all evil. The housing slowdown was evident in neighboring Hillsborough County, said Wilkinson, and that county has impact fees much lower than Polk's.

The better course would have been to study the impact fees to determine if they are doing what they are supposed to do: Cover the costs new growth places on roads, parks, schools, law enforcement and other county services. If they bring in too much money, then they should be lowered. If too little, they should be raised.

Instead, Myers continually criticizes the fees (he voted against enacting them in 2003) and blames them for stalling out the county's building boom.

Commissioner Jean Reed wound up voting for the impact-fee reduction, but not before her colleagues agreed to place a cap on it to curb the county's revenue loss.

She also raised a rhetorical question: "Are we doing this for the real estate market and the building industry, or for people who need homes?" Hint: There is no guarantee that the resulting impact-fee reduction will be passed on to the prospective home buyers.

Like just about everything else, the building-real estate pendulum will swing back. The Federal Reserve may lower interest rates. New-home construction will increase around the nation.

And some county commissioners in Bartow will take the credit for the revival, all because they lowered those dadblasted high impact fees.