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COMMENTARY LAKEFRONT

Cowin stays on same page as contributors

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COMMENTARY

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Last week, Lake School Superintendent Anna Cowin did not support a proposed impact-fee increase to build schools, the only remedy the School Board has within its grasp to make growth help pay for itself.

Her reaction was no surprise.

Development interests kicked in more than \$31,000 to get Cowin elected in 2004. And developers hate the proposal to raise the fee from \$7,055 to \$14,646.

One of the most reliable ways to determine where a politician stands is to examine the donors to his or her campaign. Follow the money trail. Their recommendations and votes seldom stray from it.

In this case, if Cowin's contributions to herself are deducted, development interests accounted for at least 30 percent of her campaign contributions.

Pressed by School Board members for a recommendation on the issue, Cowin advised the board to send its impact-fee study recommending the higher rate to a joint committee composed of School Board representatives and County Commission appointees for an economic evaluation.

She noted that the study failed to address "the economic impact and that threshold that we may cross once we double the fees so high that it may depress the economy and actually cause a reduction of income to us."

She speculated that increasing the fee by so much "may inhibit not only the growth where we get revenues, but it will even prevent people from going into homes that are more affordable because as they lose their homes -- and we know some people are -- they will not even be able to go in resale homes."

The result, she said, will be that the district gets few impact fees.

That's how bureaucrats kill something -- talk in circles, then ship it to a committee where people lacking

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expertise can express "concerns" and examine it to death.

Notice that in her recommendation to the board she did not mention students or what's best for them, and she didn't ask some committee to study whether education suffers in overcrowded schools.

One of Cowin's worries was that the district won't get cash if the county doesn't continue to grow. That's illogical.

Impact fees are not designed to build for current students. They are to construct room for new kids. If none come, more space isn't needed.

The superintendent remarked that the economic slump caused Lake's enrollment to decrease and that the district's projected number of students was wrong.

The only thing wrong was Cowin's information.

Growth experts, including those on Cowin's staff, compare beginning-of-year figures to ensure validity. Last year on the Tuesday after Labor Day, 38,505 students came to school; on the same day this year, 40,300 did. That is a difference of 1,795 students -- the equivalent of a large high school -- and a 4.6 percent increase.

Cowin's own staffers predict that number will rise during the next two weeks, as students from Northern states continue to enroll. Even now, the increase is only slightly under previous years.

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