



State should approve impact fees for schools

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Gov. Mark Sanford is a fiscal tightwad, so when he says that state lawmakers need to examine the 30-plus-year-old Home Rule legislation to allow county governments to charge newcomers to build schools, you know the state has a problem.

The problem is that South Carolina's population is expected to grow by more than a million people in the next two decades, and Beaufort and other coastal counties are in the region projected for the most growth. Indeed, Beaufort County grew by about 40 percent in the 1990s, and the pace hasn't slowed much, the current economic crisis notwithstanding.

In his State of the State address on Jan. 16, Sanford said, "We need to take another look at home rule and finding ways to allow counties the option of connecting the cost of growth with the people moving in and causing the need for more infrastructure."

As voters and taxpayers this spring face the largest school bond referendum ever presented in this county, it is important to examine these fees. Beaufort County charged a \$953 school impact fee until 1999, when a complex set of regulations in the General Assembly forced counties to reconsider them. One issue was that the state would give Beaufort County a portion of the money to build schools.

School board member Jim Bequette of Lady's Island has solicited support from local governments in Beaufort and Jasper counties for school building fees to be negotiated as part of agreements for planned unit developments, but those would not affect infill building in municipalities or homes constructed on single lots in the county.

To its credit, the county plans to charge \$6,000 per home and \$2.50 per square foot of commercial construction under new development agreements to help pay for schools. But school impact fees are needed across the board.

County and municipal governments can charge impact fees for parks, roads and libraries, and to some they might seem exorbitant, but should the cost be foisted on people who have been here a long time?

In the spring of 2007, Sen. Randy Scott, R-Dorchester, introduced a bill to allow local governments to charge an impact fee for new school construction on new residential construction, which is the area that generates the need for educational facilities, but it wasn't approved. Allowing school impact fees on all new construction is especially important in this area because only 11 percent of the southern county hasn't been approved for development already. But many of those already-permitted houses will bring school-age children with them.

Officials in fast-growing counties have lobbied lawmakers for several years now with a list of needs that includes impact fees. Unfortunately, this is an election year, and movement again isn't likely. But that isn't a reason that county, school district and municipal officials across the state shouldn't push for the fees. Who should pay -- longtime residents or those moving up and those just arriving? One thing for

sure, change must come from the Statehouse in Columbia.