



Remove the blindfolds; OK school impact fees

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Hindsight is 20/20, and the move that the Bluffton Town Council made Tuesday to require development fees to support the building of new schools is a step in the right direction.

A similar discussion took place between the Beaufort County Council's Legislative Affairs Committee and Rep. Richard Chalk, R-Hilton Head Island, but the

outcome wasn't as pleasing.

Chalk isn't keen on the impact fees. He told the committee that a bill allowing impact fees might be unconstitutional because some new home buyers don't have

children in school. By contrast, any county resident can use a public park, library or road or receive fire protection.

Officials in fast-growing counties have lobbied lawmakers for several years with a list of needs that includes impact fees. As voters and taxpayers face an April

\$162.7 million school bond referendum, 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.

Chalk makes a point that a good portion of county revenue growth in the last decade should have gone to new schools, but he ignores the state's Home Rule Act that was to give counties and school districts the ability to govern -- and tax -- in a reasonable manner.

Sen. Catherine Ceips, R-Beaufort, said Wednesday that we need to pay for schools in some form, but impact fees might not be the best form because "I don't want to do anything that would hurt home ownership," which is a quality of life issue, she said. She suggested taking a look at a rewrite of a tax increment finance bill that could surface as early as next week.

But if the legislature had not

rescinded the school impact fees, tens of thousands of homes permitted in Beaufort County would be paying the fee, and the need for referendums would be diminished.

The \$6,000 per home and

\$2.50 per square foot of commercial construction under new development agreements in Bluffton and the county acknowledge the need, and impact fees are needed across the board.

To say, as Chalk did, that people without children shouldn't pay for new schools is like saying that property owners who don't drive shouldn't pay for roads. A major benefit of schools is to educate and train students to become contributing members of society, including the requirement to pay taxes.

If the shortfall for school

construction emerged from a lack of foresight at the county level, it was exacerbated by lawmakers

who wore a blindfold when

dealing with local needs.

It's time for lawmakers to consider how fast-growing communities are to pay for school other than foist the cost on longtime residents, and the county's Legislative Delegation should lead the charge.