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Impact fees, poll says

As usual, politicians are out of sync with what North Carolinians are thinking. This time the disconnect is about how the state ought to pay for urgent transportation needs.

A poll by Elon University's Institute for Politics and Public Affairs showed overwhelming support for more public transportation and for widening roads to ease congestion. Most respondents, however, opposed paying for them using toll roads, higher gas taxes, commuter taxes and increases in license fees.

They supported a statewide bond, impact fees on developers and weight fees on trucks.

Impact fees on developers? Are state legislators listening? They haven't given a local government permission to levy impact fees since 1991 -- and come to think of it, not too many have asked.

An impact fee is paid by a builder for each new home when it's built. The fee is set by local government. By law, it must be used to help pay for the "impact" of the development, such as street improvements, new schools or parks necessary because of the development.

Impact fees are a sensible way for communities to help pay for growth-related costs up front. Reliable polls continue to suggest there's broad citizen support for them. Yet suggest one and state and local politicians run like scalded pups.

One reason: The General Assembly is historically tight-fisted with taxing authority. Another: Well-financed special interest groups don't want more fees or taxes. An example: Lobbyists for the N.C. Homebuilders Association and the N.C. Association of Realtors spent nearly a half-million dollars to defeat transfer tax proposals in last November's elections.

One of those groups, the Realtors, gave more to legislative campaigns in 2005-06 than any other interest group. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which does not have impact fees, an influential lobbying group, the Real Estate and Building Coalition, opposes them.

Impact fees aren't appropriate everywhere, and by themselves can't underwrite growth-related needs such as roads. But they ought to be among the tools local governments in fast-growing places consider -- including Charlotte-Mecklenburg.