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Bold plan for transportation funding in Pasco

By Times Wire

Pasco County has embraced a new way to pay for transportation that will mean a generous break for developers of employment centers and high-density neighborhoods. But it also offers significant public benefits, including a guaranteed funding source for mass transit and fewer incentives to develop sprawling housing developments in rural areas. While it has its drawbacks, this is a bold experiment worthy of attention from Hillsborough County and other local governments as they wrestle with paying for roads and transit systems in this a new era in which Florida no longer forces developers to pay for roads, schools and other public facilities needed to accommodate their projects.

In July, Pasco scrapped its traditional $10,000 transportation impact fee per single family home - a one-time charge on new construction to offset the demand for new roads - and replaced it with a so-called mobility fee that reduces the immediate expense on new development depending on type and location. The discount is intended to drive growth to urbanized west Pasco and the emerging State Roads 54/56 corridor across the county's southern tier - the two areas that will most benefit from enhanced mass transit. Fees to build homes in rural outposts remain higher to discourage sprawl. To boost local employment and to slow the tide of daily commuters heading south each day for jobs in other locations, the county will charge no mobility fee for new offices or industrial space. And, unlike traditional impact fees, the mobility fee can be used for more than just road construction, allowing growth to pay for buses, park-and-ride lots, sidewalks and bicycle paths. Unfortunately under the Pasco plan, the mobility fee will not finance light rail.

There are other legitimate concerns as well. To make up for the reduced dollars for transportation coming from new homes and businesses, the county will set aside a third of its future tax revenue attributed to higher property values. Such tax-increment financing is usually associated with urban redevelopment, not a county general fund. The risk is future budgets will have a disproportionate share earmarked for transportation while law enforcement, parks, libraries, elderly services and other local government functions battle over the remainder. Just as worrisome is tax roll growth that could be stymied if voters approve a lower cap on annual commercial assessments. Prudent budgeting by commissioners is a prerequisite for this mobility fee strategy to succeed.

Despite its title, a mobility fee also could result in more road congestion in the early going. There will be less money at the outset, so Pasco will delay some planned road projects. To motivate residents to use the improved mass transit system, local roads also will be allowed to carry more traffic from the higher-density developments. Regardless of the shortcomings, the absence of state-required concurrency makes this mobility fee more attractive than the alternative: standing by idly, blindly hoping developers kick in their fair share for transportation out of the goodness of their hearts. It may need to be tweaked as it moves forward, but Pasco has embarked on a worthy experiment that should encourage smarter growth, improve mass transit and provide a better quality of life in a county that is poised to resume growing when the economy recovers.

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