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City, county shun millions for parks

You go away for a year, and things change. Outside the windows at my Observer desk, where I used to look down at a Firestone parking lot, a skyscraper has arisen. While we were in Cambridge, Mass., back home a longed-for Starbucks opened within walking distance of our house. Now that I'm back and have indeed walked to that Starbucks, I see it's on Starbucks' hit list. Go figure.

But many things are unchanged. Last July I wrote that the Charlotte City Council and Mecklenburg County commissioners were ignoring an easy measure that over several years could bring in millions of dollars or hundreds of acres for parks, or both.

They still are. The idea isn't being discussed and hasn't been.

Here's what's at issue. The county and the city could take the initiative to change the city-county subdivision ordinance to require developers either to dedicate land or pay a fee pegged to the number of subdivision lots developed.

It's like an impact fee but has a key difference. Impact fees need the N.C. legislature's approval, and in the past 20 years legislators haven't approved any. A few cities and counties won impact fee permission decades ago, but not Charlotte or Mecklenburg County.

The park and recreation provision is different, and it's ridiculously easy to adopt if elected bodies have any gumption. Wake County and all its municipalities, including Raleigh, have enacted it. So have many N.C. cities and towns, among them Cornelius, Monroe, Lincolnton, Kannapolis and Belmont. Charlotte is practically ringed by places already using this provision.

Why isn't Charlotte? Why isn't Mecklenburg County?

How does \$4.3 million sound?

The sums at stake are too big to ignore: up to \$4.3 million last year, for instance.

Wake County requires developers to donate one thirty-fifth of an acre per subdivision lot or pay a fee equal to the acreage's tax value. I ran some ballpark numbers to see what that might mean here:

In 2007, Charlotte city officials OK'd 4,344 lots for single-family homes. Let's take a relatively lowball estimate for land value: \$35,000 an acre. If developers here had donated what they'd be required to in Wake, Mecklenburg would have received 124 acres for parks. That equals one good-sized regional park, or up to 60 small neighborhood parks.

If developers had opted for the fee instead of land, they'd have paid \$4.3 million for parks and recreation.

Last summer, Mecklenburg finance director Dena Diorio told me the county's annual debt service on land bonds used to buy parkland was \$7.5 million. Note: \$4.3 million could have paid more than half that debt service.

Yet elected officials still turn a cold shoulder to that income stream. Why?

Last summer I put the question to county commissioners' chair Jennifer Roberts. She said she had never heard about the provision. "I'd be interested to hear more," she said.

I asked her last week if it had come up in the past year. "I'm not aware of that coming up in county discussions," she said.

One obvious reason for local governments' head-in-the-sand pose is that elected officials don't like to anger developers, who are big campaign donors. Further, the developers' paid lobbyists treat any mention of impact fees as though it's a proposal to spread anthrax spores along Tryon Street.

Who gains? Who suffers?

But another, less well understood factor also keeps those millions of dollars from being collected. The Park and Rec department is a city-county agency but run and funded by the county. The subdivision process is run by the city, part of the planning and zoning office. Only a courageous or foolhardy city official would propose something that will incur developers' wrath but helps only the county, not the city, budget.

An obvious rejoinder is that Charlotte residents use parks and pay county taxes, too, and would benefit from a bigger parks budget.

I called City Manager Curt Walton to ask if this measure was ever mentioned in city discussions. A spokesman relayed his response: It has never come up, and anyway, the county does parks, not the city.

There is one small change since last year: The county this spring adopted a new, 10-year master plan for parks, and Park and Recreation Director Jim Garges made a point of getting City Council approval as well. The "Funding and Revenue Strategies" section has a lengthy menu of ways that might bring in park money. This provision is among them. "It's our feeling there at least should be a discussion about this," Garges said.

Given the housing downturn, I don't foresee politicians proposing any idea that upsets developers.

It's hard to know whether it's more comforting to think ignorance or political cowardice is to blame. But the bottom line doesn't change: Millions of dollars for parks, lost.