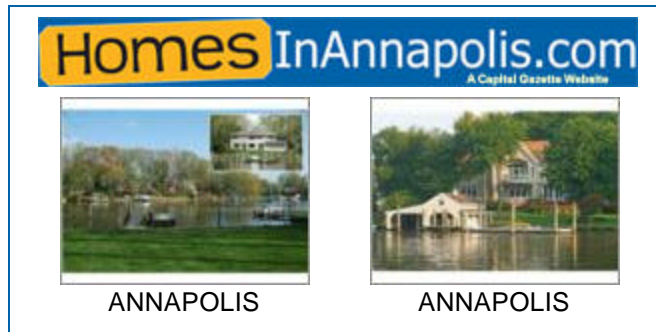


Our Say: Council closing in on crucial decision on impact fees

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The County Council deserves credit for the hard work it is putting in on impact fees: an important, complex and contentious issue.

But it could have spared itself the flak it took Tuesday night for even considering a cockamamie plan to apply impact fees, for the first time, not just to new construction but to additions on existing homes.



The whole point of impact fees is to make new development cover the real costs it imposes on a jurisdiction - the expenses for roads, schools and public safety facilities.

So what does this have to do with individual homeowners, say, turning a deck into a sunroom? Were such improvements likely to send additional children to the local school or put more cars on the roads?

And the proposed home-improvement fees depended not just on the size of the addition, but on the size of the home. In some cases, the cost of a 500-square-foot addition would have been 10 times higher for a smaller home. Homeowners would have paid \$1,400 for adding a 600-square-foot addition to a home that was less than 1,000 square feet - but nothing for doubling the size of a 6,000-square-foot house.

Huh? Whose idea of fairness was this?

To be fair to the council, on Tuesday it dumped this proposal, 6-1, after more than 200 people - a lot of them livid - showed up at its hearing. But we don't understand what

this idea was doing on the agenda in the first place. The council has enough hard decisions before it without making more trouble for itself.

This county has among the lowest impact fees in the state. An advisory committee estimates that it recaptures no more than 22 percent of the actual cost of growth. Some of those costs were piled onto county taxpayers in general, while the county built up a \$1.5 billion backlog of school construction projects, and another imposing backlog of road projects.

But while higher fees are obviously needed, the economy is slow and this is hardly an ideal time for abruptly piling more expenses onto commercial and residential development. So on Tuesday the council passed amendments to grandfather projects already under way, and to phase in the proposed higher fees - designed to cover 80 percent of the actual cost of development - more slowly.

Any schedule of fees the council adopts will be simultaneously attacked as too high and too low, and a lot of people will invariably declare that it's unfair. If the council wanted to avoid effort and reduce political fallout, it could have simply gotten behind the impact fee bill the county executive put on its desk earlier this year. Instead it had its own study done and is working out its own plan.

Now that the home-addition folly is behind it, we're hoping the council can work out the rest of that plan soon. Its next hearing is scheduled for Sept. 15.

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