

HERNANDO IMPACT FEE PLAN UNDERMINES SMART GROWTH

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Smart growth just took a backseat to any growth in Hernando County. Tuesday, county commissioners, with only Nick Nicholson dissenting, killed an idea to promote in-fill development and targeted employment growth. The reasonable plan would have guided new construction into exiting neighborhoods and commerce hubs outfitted with appropriate infrastructure.

The proposed incentive — a discounted transportation impact fee — instead will be offered to new construction in all of Hernando rather than to limited geographic areas like Spring Hill and near the city of Brooksville. Commission Chairman David Russell championed the universal discount saying the alternative "could stifle some of our growth."

His caution is misplaced. Russell simply regurgitated the unwise strategy of promoting sprawl. It continues the misdirected philosophy of past commissions which authorized residential development in the county's most rural regions.

The former transportation impact fee — a one-time charge on new construction to offset traffic demands on the county roads — was \$3,627 per single-family home. The commission adopted that fee in 2005, but cut it in half in 2009 then waived it entirely in 2011 in an ill-fated and short-sighted attempt to stimulate the residential construction industry.

A consultant is now calculating an updated fee projected to be \$5,767 per single-family home. Under the in-fill proposal, the fee would be reduced to \$1,730 in the target areas and could be \$3,884 elsewhere in what was dubbed an affordable growth strategy. Instead, the commission picked \$2,537 per house or 44 percent of the full fee.

The extended price break ignores the benefits of targeting growth including maximizing use of existing infrastructure and promoting economic development in logical locations. It also runs the potential of inflating the shortfall in the county's road-construction budget. The county's five-year plan now has \$104 million worth of projects that lack financing.

That means today's discounts are going to force future discussions about increasing sales, gasoline or property taxes. A group of community stakeholders said they favored the sales tax, but voters rejected a county promoted half-cent sales tax increase in 2004 and the majority of the current board has shown no inclination toward scheduling another referendum. Some current commissioners also have dismissed previous staff proposals to seek a gasoline tax increase and property tax increases have been verboten.

It will take strong leadership to reverse these machinations. Otherwise, Hernando can look forward to a hodge-podge of new development far from existing services and a diminishing long-range road-building budget. It will lead to more road congestion and longer commute times.

In terms of an economic stimulus, there is nothing smart about that