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## Impact fees impact our county

Posted By [Thomas Harding](#) On October 26, 2010 @ 6:33 pm In [From The Paper, Guest Commentary](#) | [No Comments](#)

What do Washington High School, Shepherdstown Fire Company, Sam Michaels Park and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department have in common?

They have all benefited from impact fees.

Impact fees have been in effect in Jefferson County since 2004, and are collected when a new home or a new commercial building is constructed. The rationale for impact fees is that new development increases the need for schools, parks, emergency services, and law enforcement. Impact fees make new development pay a share of providing these additional services. The impact fee for a new single family residence is \$13,070. The largest portion of this impact fee (about 80 percent, or \$11,350) goes to schools. The balance of the fee is earmarked for law enforcement, parks, and emergency services. Only capital expenditures can be funded by impact fees; they cannot be used for programs or personnel.

Commercial impact fees are determined by a formula that includes type of use, vehicle trips, number of employees, and amount of square footage. The fee is due prior to final occupancy permit. Commercial uses provide fees only for emergency services and law enforcement.

Since 2004, over \$15.5 million in impact fees have been distributed. Schools are the major recipient (\$14.5 million), followed by parks (\$597,000), emergency services (\$467,000) and law enforcement (\$162,000). Impact fees have helped build school facilities at Washington High, Driswood Elementary, Blue Ridge Elementary, and South Jefferson Elementary. They helped finance the acquisition of parkland and helped purchase fire trucks, ambulances, and police cruisers.

Every three years, the Jefferson County Commission re-examines the impact fee program. The review for 2010-11 has begun with informal meetings of agencies that receive impact fees and municipal officials. The public outreach program will begin after the first of the year when two studies related to impact fees are completed.

I support impact fees. I do believe, however, some adjustments to the fee structure need to be considered.

Right now residential rates are based on three broad housing types: single family, attached, and apartments. The County Commission has directed staff to look at whether fees should be based on square footage or number of bedrooms instead. This would allow smaller homes to pay a lower fee. Proponents of affordable housing are concerned impact fees are discouraging development in this sector of the housing market. This needs to be addressed.

Both Charles Town and Ranson have stated municipal parkland is not being fairly considered in the park impact fee formula. Hopefully, staff from the municipalities will make recommendations in this area.

Finally, pressure is increasing to reduce impact fees for non-residential development because of the economic slump we are in. Members of the Jefferson County Development Authority contend impact fees are causing potential employers to avoid Jefferson County. I don't buy that argument. Businesses only pay impact fees for emergency services and law enforcement, and only when building new structures. Vacant buildings, like those at the county industrial park, have no impact fees, yet two promising out-of-state businesses decided not to move there, opting to stay at their current location. Larger economic forces are at play than impact fees.

At the same time, I do agree the fees charged to commercial properties for emergency services seem very high when compared to national averages. This is a topic that needs to be investigated further.

Revisiting impact fees every three years is good public policy. I am not interested in doing away with impact fees, but I am willing to consider some adjustments to the fee structure. The public will be involved in these important decisions. Make sure your voice is heard.

In the meantime, whenever you hear the siren of an ambulance or a fire truck or a police cruiser, whenever you see a student enter a new school facility, whenever you enjoy improvements to the park system, remember: Impact fees help make it all possible.

*Lyn Widmyer is president of the Jefferson County Commission.*

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