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Smart growth requires smart decisionmaking

By Times Wire

Smart growth doesn't mean cheap growth. As county government attempts to steer high-end business growth and so-called transit-oriented development into two corridors along west and southern Pasco, the price of that strategy could mean new assessments for all property owners and higher gasoline taxes for motorists.

It would be easy to dismiss the proposals - still in their infancy - as unfair subsidies for developers, but the logic behind the plan is sound: Pasco needs to redevelop its aging west side; channel new businesses and residents into the State Road 54/56 corridor to maximize future mass transit; and help preserve the rural flavor of the north-central and northeast parts of the county.

As incentives, the county's traditional transportation impact fee would be replaced by a so-called mobility fee, a one-time assessment on new construction. The fees would be discounted and in some instances waived entirely for builders of transit-oriented development or for companies building new industrial or office space as employment centers. Under some scenarios, the fees for retailing and its traditional minimum-wage employment actually increase. The motivation is to try to lure better-paying jobs to Pasco County and to curb the tens of thousands of residents who commute outside the county to work each day.

But building and maintaining transportation infrastructure still requires sufficient funding. To offset the discounted mobility fee, the county could adopt a new $50-per-property annual assessment under a municipal service benefit unit. The five-cent-per-gallon local option gasoline tax could be enacted to pay for the maintenance and operation of future mass transit that will serve the county. That change is proposed because impact fees can be used for capital construction, but not for operation and maintenance.

It is a significant alteration from the status quo because higher transportation costs would now be borne by existing residents, rather than simply passing on road construction expenses to new-home buyers via impact fees. It raises questions of fairness that must be addressed. How do you charge an assessment to someone who already paid the full impact fee? And, why should the owner of a modest-priced house pay the same as owners of affluent residences? Those answers should be part of substantial public dialogue between commissioners and their constituents.

Commissioner Ann Hildebrand wondered about a real estate transfer tax instead of a per-household assessment or gas tax, but that requires approval by the Legislature and does not recognize that such a plan has been promoted unsuccessfully for more than 15 years because of resistance from Realtors. Neither the per-household assessment nor the gasoline tax increase need approval in Tallahassee.

Departing Commissioner Michael Cox, who lost his re-election bid on Nov. 2 to Henry Wilson Jr., urged his fellow commissioners not to duck difficult political decisions ahead.

"It's going to require leadership, not politicians, leadership. I challenge all my fellow commissioners to step up and show leadership."

Indeed. The alternative is more of the same unflattering growth patterns of walled communities, cul-de-sac streets, and motorists all using the same congested highways to get home each evening from their jobs in other counties.

Yes, the task ahead is politically difficult. But it is even more difficult to champion smart growth and then fail to be smart about encouraging it.

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