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EDITORIAL: Collecting Overdue Debts for Public Needs

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What's this?

Kitsap County may have \$800,000 out there for the asking.

Or maybe not.

The county is owed at least \$124,000 in impact fees never paid for 60 homes built since 2004, says Linda Jones of the county's Department of Community Development. And before 2004? Nearly 300 other properties may have unpaid impact fees — adding up to an estimated overall total of \$800,000.

Impact fees are intended to help cover the costs of schools, roads and parks, which increase as more people move to Kitsap County. They're levied on residential and commercial construction, under the premise that new construction is an incentive for population growth. Currently, impact fees add up to about \$2,100 for each new home in an unincorporated area, to be paid at the

time of occupancy.

There's some disagreement about why the county hasn't gotten all its impact fee money — and whether the problem is that it hasn't been *paid*, or been *collected*. Responding to builders' complaints, the county in 2004 stopped collecting the impact fees up front, when a building permit was issued; instead, the fees now are paid — supposedly — when a new home is occupied. But for whatever reason, some homes are illegally occupied because they don't have county occupancy permits, which means they also didn't pay impact fees.



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Regardless, there are hundreds of thousands of dollars, unpaid and uncollected, that could be used to good purpose for our schools, roads and parks.

All this was reported in a front-page story on Wednesday. In an unrelated but equally frustrating article that same day, it was reported that in the 2005-2006 fiscal year, 10 state programs in six agencies were owed nearly \$650 million in overdue debts. The findings came in a performance audit by the state auditor's office as a result of voter-approved Initiative 900.

In particular, Auditor Brian Sonntag's office said that eight of the 10 programs need to improve their collection efforts by making more phone calls to debtors, sending more letters and initiating more legal actions against debtors, such as securing liens against their properties. If such actions enabled the eight programs to collect even half of their outstanding debts, the state would receive about \$160 million.

Not surprisingly, state agency bureaucrats were critical of the findings. Some of the recommendations already are being used, they said, and in some departments it's questionable whether they'd really help debt collections, anyway.

When government entities ask for more money from the public, they invariably report cost-cutting measures and efficiencies they've already taken — good-faith actions that demonstrate their responsible use of taxpayers' dollars. And generally, those actions are both fiscally effective and well-intended.

Unfortunately they are undermined by facts like those reported on Wednesday. Public entities that allow large amounts of money to go unpaid, without making vigorous efforts to collect it, are ignoring one of the most basic principles of good money management. Potentially, they're also eroding the public's estimation of their ability to be good stewards of the public's money.

Locally, at least, the county's Department of Community Development has been forthcoming in publicly addressing the problem. Next, they plan to discuss the issue with members of the building community, as well as others who may help in better defining and resolving it. We commend their efforts, and hope they bear fruit in restoring funds for our community needs in resolving this issue for the future.

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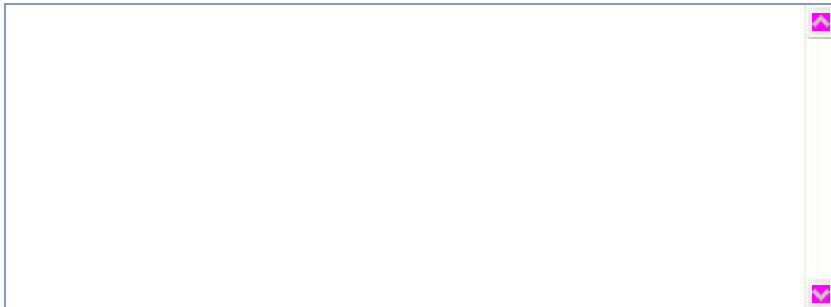
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