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Our Say: For all its flaws, impact fee bill should be passed



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We have said many times in this space that developers should pay for the cost of the new roads and schools required by growth. For too long taxpayers have shelled out more money to pay for improvements to the county's infrastructure and they are ready to shift the burden to developers.

Although developers have been charged impact fees for years, those fees have fallen well short of covering all the costs. To catch up now requires the county to double the fee to \$11,363 for a 3,000-square-foot home.

After struggling for months to come up with an increase all could agree on, County Executive John Leopold and County Council Chairman Cathy Vitale have hammered out a compromise that we criticized last week.

The compromise is to phase in the fee between now and January 2011. Homes built prior to January 2010 would be assessed a fee that is actually lower than the one being applied today. That fee would rise one year later, and then, finally, rise again in 2011.

We thought the proposal made no sense because the county cannot afford to reduce the fee for even one year. Additionally, we thought it best to simply agree to a fee that would not be applied in its entirety until one or two years from now.

We still are not fond of this compromise. But we now understand that it's the only version that has a chance of passing.

The compromise came in the form of an amendment that swayed some of those who opposed a big increase in impact fees. Council member Ed Middlebrooks stubbornly remains opposed to higher impact fees, suggesting to us that he wants taxpayers to pay for growth. Councilman Jamie Benoit doesn't like the idea of lowering fees first.

But Councilmen Ron Dillon and Daryl Jones approved the amendment, while indicating they may still vote against the bill when it comes up for a vote next Monday.

We don't know what their position is on higher impact fees. The odds are good that if this bill doesn't pass, the council will be debating this for another two years as anticipated growth in west county overburdens schools and roads.

We don't want to see this debated any longer. If this is the best compromise the county can come up with, the council should approve the bill.

We understand that developers will pass along higher impact fees and, in the end, the new homeowner will pay considerably more to live here. This may even delay a rebound in the real estate market.

But if growth slows, is that really bad? Growth is healthy for the local economy, but the torrid growth of the 1980s and early 1990s caused many of today's infrastructure problems.

Taxpayers tired of shouldering the financial burden of growth should encourage the four opposing council members to get this bill - however flawed - passed.

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