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Guest Column: Impact fee bill fair to taxpayers

By JOHN R. LEOPOLD

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We are all facing some of the most challenging economic conditions in decades. Whether it is drawing up the county's \$1.2 billion budget or balancing the family checkbook, each of us is making tough decisions almost daily.



As county executive, I have an obligation to every taxpayer to ensure that the county's revenue is raised fairly and spent wisely. The County Council, in its budgetary role, shares that responsibility.

We always remember that, under our current county budget, 50 cents of every dollar spent goes to our school system; 20 cents supports our police, fire and emergency medical services; and 3 cents is allocated to our community college. That leaves 27 cents out of every dollar to operate all the other functions of county government.

Tomorrow the council will make a final decision on the impact fees charged to new developments for roads, schools and public safety infrastructure.

After almost 10 months of public hearings, a report from a nationally recognized expert, and work by a County Council advisory committee led by former county executive Robert Neall, the facts are clear:

Since impact fees were last adjusted in 2001, the net county cost of road construction has increased 150 percent.

Since impact fees were last adjusted in 2001, school construction cost per student has

increased 165 percent.

The fee schedules adopted by the council in an amendment proposed by Chairman Cathy Vitale, R-Severna Park, are based on data and calculations accepted by the county auditor and the County Budget Office.

Ms. Vitale's amendment, which my administration strongly supported, adjusts the fee schedules beginning immediately, with additional phase-in periods starting Jan. 1, 2010, and ending Jan. 1, 2011. This approach has received widespread support, including endorsements by the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties and the Anne Arundel Sierra Club.

The failure to adjust impact fees to accurately reflect the costs of new development to our roads, schools and public safety infrastructure would mean that capital projects to increase capacity must be financed by more and more general taxpayer dollars.

We must stop asking our county taxpayers to reach into their pockets to pay the costs for additional seats in our public schools, for improved roads, or for new police, fire and emergency medical facilities that are the direct result of new development.

Impact fees are the fairest way to ensure that new construction bears its share of the cost of these improvements. Under county law, these school and road impact fees must be spent in the districts in which they are raised. This guarantees that these payments must go to improve these facilities in the areas affected by the new development.

The alternative - the continued subsidy of the cost of new development by residential property owners - is unfair and unacceptable.

My administration has worked closely with the County Council to reach this collaborative consensus on the appropriate impact fee schedules. The current bill provides an economic incentive that will preserve jobs and avoid layoffs while generating revenue and eliminating the need for general tax increases.

It is imperative that we have a county fiscal structure in place to provide the roads, schools and public safety infrastructure to meet the demands of base expansion and enhance the county's ability to compete in the regional and global economy. The council must act now to guarantee our county's fiscal health and protect our taxpayers.

The writer is Anne Arundel County executive.


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