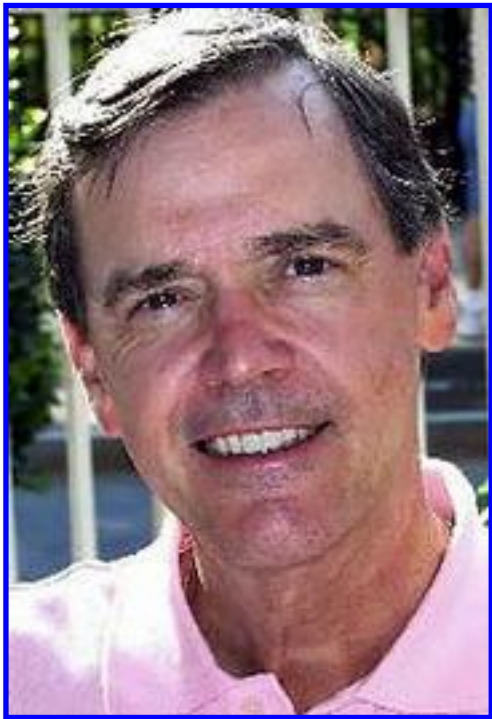


## Impact fees a start on handling growth

By Ron Brinson

Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Lower Dorchester County stands face to face with the differences between growth and progress. The very lifestyles and community values that define the Dorchester residential development market are now threatened by developments that take little account of public facilities impacts. Adequacy of water and sewer systems and roadways are standing arguments in the processes of rampant growth. But stuffing children and their teachers into crowded school facilities goes beyond mere argument — it undermines the premise of any progressive, value-driven community.



Ron Brinson

Good schools with adequate capacities ought to be the price of development in any enlightened political jurisdiction — and Dorchester County may be catching up with this reality. Senate Bill 235 authorizes the Dorchester District 2 school board to impose development impact fees. It has passed both houses and awaits final ratification and Gov.

Mark Sanford's consideration.

The bill is a campaign promise Sen. Mike Rose has delivered. He's confident S.235 passes all legal tests and the governor's concerns about local legislation. There's strong precedent, too. A York County district has retained limited school impact fees authority for more than a decade.

The Realtor-developer lobby did its best to head off S.235, arguing that impact fees will simply make affordable housing in lower Dorchester County less affordable.

No doubt they were concerned, too, that the Rose bill opens the gate for more impact fee authorizations in high growth counties.

It has. Nearly identical measures have been introduced for school districts in Beaufort and Jasper counties.

Reps. Annette Young and Jenny Horne upset many constituents when they amended Rose's Senate-passed bill with limitations, including capping the school board's impact fee authority at \$2,500 per residential unit. In fact, their actions may have saved the bill by making it broadly acceptable and more resistant to the developers' lobby.

Rose smartly accepted their amendments and avoided any further risky debate that might have exposed the measure to one of many possible procedural deaths.

Dorchester District 2 is a school district swamped by subdivision developments, with more on the way. Some projections estimate that 10,000 new homes already are permitted in lower Dorchester County, and as they are built, at least 10 new schools will be required to meet demands.

The bill is a legislative achievement for sure, but it is not the ultimate solution. Impact fees alone will never generate sufficient funding to assure adequate school capacities. But this good legislative work by Sen. Rose, and Reps. Young and Horne should cue Dorchester County's elected leadership to give school facilities funding the priority it deserves.

And you'd think developers would be at the front of the line demanding they do just that. Good schools have been a housing market attraction for lower Dorchester County. But crowded schools quickly become unexceptional schools and a drag on home sales and home values. Put another way, who would want to buy a home in a community that doesn't value education and passively accepts the insidious ravages of over-crowded classrooms? Sooner or later, that raw question burdens subdivision sales plans.

For elected leaders in high-growth districts, school facilities funding is a prickly political

issue. Requiring a fair share from new home buyers is only one part of the policy equation. Many long-time residents with no school-age children object to taxes for new school buildings needed to accommodate rampant incremental growth. This begs the long-arching question of who enjoys the values of public education.

Good schools benefit every community segment. Inferior schools burden every community segment. More objectively, good schools add market value to every property; a struggling school system detracts from property values.

Even retirees with no immediate connection to public schools should understand that.

Impact fees can be that one-small-step beginning of a bold new approach to assure that classroom capacities in lower Dorchester County keep reasonable pace with development. Realtors, developers and folks with no school-age children ought to be helpmates in this process.

***Ron Brinson**, a former associate editor of this newspaper, is a Dorchester County resident. He has two sons enrolled at Fort Dorchester High School.*

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