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Our Say: Delayed impact fee increase better than no increase at all

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During Monday's County Council debate, in discussing the bill that will eventually raise this county's impact fees to something close to a realistic level, County Councilman Jamie Benoit voted the wrong way but came up with the best line.

Mr. Benoit recalled trying to get a last-minute plane ticket to Boston. "I was told there was only one ticket available, and that I could get to Boston if I was willing to connect in Phoenix, Ariz. And this reminds me of that. We're going (from) ... Baltimore to Boston, via Phoenix."

That captures the counterintuitive nature of the bill the council passed, 4-3, with Mr. Benoit voting against.

We reluctantly supported the bill because it is evidently the only way to get the council to raise impact fees on developers so that they are closer to the actual cost of schools, roads and other infrastructure required by growth. When these fees fall short, county taxpayers, of course, make up

the difference.

And the fees have been falling short here for a long time: Anne Arundel County has some of the lowest such fees in Maryland, recapturing just 22 percent of the cost of infrastructure expansion.

It was back in January that County Executive John Leopold proposed fee increases to recover 100 percent of infrastructure costs. If he thought the council would move quickly on this, he was wrong. Even after a committee headed by a former county executive reviewed the issue, agreement remained elusive on what, if any, increases would be fair.

As the debate continued, the county's housing market deteriorated - and then came this fall's economic trauma. Doing anything to discourage home building or commercial expansion started to seem riskier.

Ultimately, the only proposal with a chance of getting a council majority was one than precedes higher rates with *lower* rates. Under the bill, the fee charged for building a 3,000-square-foot home, now \$5,096, would drop to \$2,272 in 2009, rise to \$4,546 in 2010, and finally go up to \$11,363 in 2011.

When the fees more than double in 2011, they will garner an estimated \$9.9 million for the county - which officials hope will make up for the \$2.5 million to \$5 million that the temporarily lowered rates will cost the county.

You can describe this as economic stimulus for a half-dead construction industry - or as taking one costly step back before you take two steps forward. But the only description that matters is that it got the crucial vote of Councilman Daryl Jones - who, much like Mr. Benoit, likes the eventual higher rates but not the temporary lower ones.

There may be a certain lack of logic to this, but the alternative was yet more months, or even years, of debate, while growth in west county piles up infrastructure costs. The important thing now is that the council doesn't later retreat on the higher fees.

We're glad the council finally got this resolved. In politics the shortest distance between two points isn't a straight line - it's the route that gets you a majority of votes.

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