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Commentary

Proposal to cut impact fees would hurt schools

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TAKING NAMES

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Not long ago, the Sentinel told the story of a high school in DeLand that was so strapped for cash, it resorted to warehousing hundreds of students in a gymnasium.

Without money for substitutes, when teachers were absent, the principal said he had no choice but to stash multiple classes in an un-air-conditioned gym where students were told to sit quietly on the bleachers.

Apparently state Sen. Mike Bennett is miffed they still had bleachers.

How else would you explain the Bradenton Republican's proposal for a three-year moratorium on impact fees -- which would cut hundreds of millions of dollars, if not a billion, from our already underfunded education system?

It's like he looked at the national school-funding rankings and was irritated that there were still a few states spending less on each student than Florida.

Really, though, Bennett isn't anti-education. He's just pro-developer.

The development community has never liked the idea of making growth pay for itself.

Building on the cheap, after all, is much more profitable.

And what developers want in Florida, they usually cut campaign checks to get.

Actually, in Bennett's case, he didn't need the checks as incentive.

"I am a developer," he said. "So yeah, I'm their guy."

How refreshingly candid.

Bennett's proposal would prohibit cities and counties from collecting the impact fees levied on new development for three years.

This would help slingshot us back in time to the days when homebuilders could build as many houses as they wanted -- without having to worry about whether there were enough schools to educate the children who would live inside them. Instead, the new kids would either crowd the existing schools, or taxpayers would be asked to pick up the tab for new ones.

See why the developers like that way so much better?

Axing school fees alone -- and keep in mind there are also impact fees for fire protection, roads and parks -- would have stripped the state's schools of \$350 million last year, according to the Florida School Boards Association.

Orange County would've lost \$32.6 million.

Can you imagine taking that money away from our already-struggling system?

Orange School Board member Joie Cadle put it this way: "One group's stimulus package is another's foreclosure."

It's the alleged stimulus part of Bennett's proposal that's most perplexing.

Developers claim that reining in impact fees would spur development. First of all, that's debatable. The country's current economic problems have little, if anything, to do with government fees.

But even if curtailing fees did encourage the construction of more subdivisions and strip centers, what kind of sense does that make? Overdevelopment is a big part of what led us to our current problems. It's part of why your house is worth half of what it was four years ago and why our commercial and retail scene is a mess.

This market is overbuilt. And painful as it may be, it needs time to correct.

No one argues that impact fees aren't significant. In Orange County, they total about \$16,500 on each new home.

But the simple fact is that you cannot get schools, roads, police protection or firefighters for free.

And since this state decided to constitutionally ban income taxes, it makes sense to collect some of it from the new growth that helps generate the greater needs.

If anyone tells you they want to cut impact fees, simply ask them: Well, whose taxes do you want to raise to make up the difference?

If you push Bennett hard enough, you get the impression that even he knows his bill is a bad one that has little to no chance of passing. He says his main gripe is that impact fees are way too high in some places and that he'd rather look at other ways, such as real-estate transfer fees, to fund the schools.

He may have some valid points. But the lottery scam taught Floridians to be wary of politicians promising new and exciting ways to pump money into our schools.

And even if Bennett's bill is just an attention-grabbing negotiating tactic, the time for playing games with our schools is over.

If you'd like more information on Senate Bill 630 -- or if you'd like to tell your own senator what you think about the bill -- you can find more information at flsenate.gov.

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