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Editorial: Get Cape's utilities back on track

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The on-again, off-again Cape Coral utility expansion program is too important to be left in deadlock and uncertainty any longer.

The City Council needs to hash out a compromise, or this vitally needed project may start running into real delays.

We respect the critics' insistence on lower costs to residents for this painful infrastructure retrofit. But because of the brutal slump in construction business, costs to residents are already projected to be lower than they have been in years.

Cape's struggles over this \$1 billion, years-long project are likely to be faced by other old subdivisions, such as Lehigh Acres, if septic tanks and private wells are deemed to be outdated and are slated for replacement by much more expensive central systems.

Other questions are festering about the Cape project, but as far as the costs are concerned, there should be a way to crunch the numbers and reach compromise. That's what politics is all about.

Monday, Mayor Eric Feichthaler said he was willing to switch to a "yes" vote on proceeding with the plan for the next phase of the giant project if the council would agree to lower impact fees, a component of what residents in the expansion area will have to pay, by \$1,000 from \$6,750. He also wants another \$500 shaved off the assessment component, which has dropped along with the economy.

But council members Tim Day, Bill Deile and Pete Brandt, who voted with the mayor against proceeding last month and whose assent was needed to revive the issue, remained opposed to going forward with the next phase, in the SW 6-7 area. All have questioned the project's costs and execution.

So the mayor remained in the "no" column as well, leaving the council deadlocked at 4-4 on going forward. Feichthaler needs to lead, and in this case that means backing off and joining those council members who want to go forward, but oppose the impact fee reduction.

"We have a blessing and a curse as council members to have control of the purse strings," Feichthaler said Monday. "And if we say we're not going to tolerate a certain level of spending, it's not going to happen. I'm not going to waver one inch." If everyone digs in that hard, we go nowhere.

As Councilwoman Dolores Bertolini said, cutting the impact fee merely shifts part of the cost of this phase of the expansion to other utility rate payers, many of whom have already been stuck with higher project assessments in earlier phases.

We urge the mayor to change his position on impact fees to get this project back on track.

He has invited citizens to a Thursday town meeting, which would be an opportunity for them to make their feelings known.

