

State should study impact fees

With Columbia County's proximity to the city of Augusta, which seems to spend money on, and then shelve, consultants and studies as often as cars crash on Washington Road, there's every reason to be skeptical of such spending.

But local lawmakers, including one from each of our neighboring counties, have put together a proposal for a study with statewide implications that could settle an issue long beset with confusion: Impact fees.

With sponsorship from, among others, Columbia County state Sen. Bill Jackson and Richmond County state Sen. Ed Tarver, the Senate Comprehensive Development Impact Fee Study Committee would have until Dec. 31 to "closely scrutinize and improve Georgia's laws concerning development impact fees."

That scrutiny is badly needed. Communities such as Columbia County have themselves studied implementation of impact fees as a way of having new developments pay more of a share of the costs for expansion of government services to accommodate them.

The last time that happened, though, Columbia County's impact fee study committee decided state law is too complicated and needs to be changed before it would make sense to try to implement impact fees locally.

While we disagreed with the committee's overall conclusions, some of their points are well taken - particularly as related to schools. In Columbia County, the school system is a prime attraction for residents of new developments, yet Georgia law doesn't allow impact fees to benefit schools. That's nonsense, and should be one of the first changes proposed by the senate study.

Of course, fans of impact fees shouldn't be too optimistic about the outcome of that study. Once the resolution creating the Senate committee made its way through the Senate State and Local Governmental Operations Committee last week, a paragraph had been added stacking the study committee with members from organizations including those who generally have been hostile to impact fees - especially those in construction and real estate.

Even so, just the fact that Jackson, Tarver and other lawmakers have moved to actually study impact fees and the state's overly complicated law is a hopeful sign that at least a long-neglected issue is getting attention.

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