



## THE EXPRESS-TIMES

### Housing impact fee consequences need fair debate

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The story is told that a remarkable tree once grew in the middle of a quiet meadow. Instead of apples or peaches, this tree produced priceless diamonds bigger than hen's eggs.

After the tree was discovered people started arguing about the diamonds. Eventually entire wars were fought over the tree and piles of bodies littered the ground around it. These bodies made very good fertilizer for the tree.

One moral of the story is that fantasies about wealth or being deprived of it can produce terrible consequences. But Northampton County's new discussion about school-based impact fees can avoid those consequences if we first decide among ourselves what is fair about new housing and school expansion.

The principle behind impact fees is simple: New housing developments create the need for new schools which increase taxes that everyone must pay. Therefore, these increased property taxes are in fact a subsidy of developers' profits.

To avoid excessive new taxes, developers should at least pay the full cost of school construction which their business activities impose on the community.

The first reaction of some landholders will be that they will lose money when they want to sell or subdivide their land. That simply isn't true -- any cost would be passed on to the home purchaser, and senior citizen homes or a home for a relative could be exempt because they do not necessarily produce school expansion.

Developers would make these impact fees part of their overhead. However, low-end developers who want to squeeze as many homes as possible out of a site are already telling landowners their property values will be diluted.

In reality, high-end developers who produce low-impact housing can afford to pay more to landowners because those developers build fewer but more expensive houses. And fewer homes mean less pressure on schools.

The clients of high-end developers don't want single-acre lots with primitive septic systems and a view of someone else's driveway. They want imaginative homes by environmentally enlightened designers, not plastic boxes that have been out of date since the 1960s.

Low-end developers and their lack of home-building savvy are at the heart of the problem, not new housing. Incidentally, some low-end developers are more inclined to try splitting a community rather than upgrading their businesses. Smart folks will look a little further than what these operators tell them.

Does any of this matter if you want to sell your land? Perhaps some folks don't care if the sale of their property causes unnecessary and tremendous harm to their neighbors, including increased taxes. But I believe once a person abandons his sense of fairness for the sake of short-term profit, he leads himself and his family by a short route to chaos.

This discussion calls for enlightened leadership. Let's insist that our elected officials provide that leadership so we can, as a community, reach a consensus about one of the most important issues we face.

Donald Dal Maso is a classical musician. He and his wife own a farm in Lower Mount Bethel Township.

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