

Development: Balance is Needed

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Developers and the Chamber of Commerce typically view all development as good. Some citizens view all development as bad. Who is right?

Well, if it weren't for development, we'd all be living in tents and would have to forage for food. That would not be good.

On the other hand, if we rubber stamped every proposed development, then after a few hundred years a small town could become the size of New York City with its overpopulation, traffic, and pollution¹. That would be bad.

Clearly a happy medium must be achieved. Developers are entitled to make money ... lots of it considering all of the financial risks that they take ... but common good and quality of life needs of the residents must be served. How do we strike a balance between these opposing objectives?

I assert that there is a simple solution. Town leaders need to identify what a town has and give priority to proposed developments that help address the town's deficiencies. For example, if a town is deficient in affordable housing, then new development must help increase the supply of affordable housing. Conversely, if there is an overabundance of luxury apartments (as there is), then additional ones should be given low priority. If an area of town has a traffic problem, then new development should not be approved for that area of town. If schools are overcrowded, then new development should pay "impact fees" or donate land to help alleviate that problem. If a town lacks an ample number of professional jobs, then it should court companies that will bring such jobs.

To properly assess what a town needs, a "report card" should be produced that identifies what a town has and what it ideally should have. This would be a tabular list of various measurements of a town, such as its affordable housing, traffic, parks, buses, bike trails, etc. There might be a couple of dozen parameters. The report card should be online and sortable so that developers and residents can view where shortcomings lie.

[Click here](#) for an example of what such a report card might look like for Chapel Hill.

This approach should help us efficiently and fairly close gaps in any category.

What problems confront this plan?

1. Developers are skilled lobbyists. The NC Home Builders Association has succeeded in getting the NC General Assembly to severely restrict when impact fees can be assessed. See [their website](#).
2. Developers keep espousing the myth that new development is needed to "spread the tax base" ... and therefore lower taxes. If there were any validity to that argument, then a large urban area (like NYC) would be cheaper to live in than a low density area like Caswell County, NC.
3. Developers and the Chamber of Commerce donate large amounts of money to candidates who support their views, and they try to stack local boards with people amenable to their cause.
4. In 2014 developers succeeded in getting most public comment removed from the Form Based Code (FBC) process. Only the Town Manager and the Community Design Commission can comment.

To offset this lobbying by the pro-growth people, it is imperative that elected officials serve as advocates for citizens and fight for the common good and quality of life elements. Balance is needed.

1: At 1.5% annual growth, a town of 75,000 would swell to 8 million people in 314 years. At 6% growth it would only take 81 years.