

Is it a “Development” Problem?

Submitted by George “Jody” Sweeney

There is not a single resident in Kent County that is not aware of our development problem. There are some 40,000 empty lots on Kent County and other municipal lands that do not have homes on them. There were many applications for new subdivisions submitted to the Regional Planning Commission that received the proper approval and were far enough along in the process that they have not been affected by the moratorium. Towns like Camden, Wyoming, Smyrna, and Dover are annexing adjacent land that will be used for new subdivisions that will not fall under the rules of Kent County’s Levy Court. Could we possibly be looking at 50-55,000 homes in the next 10 years? Is that a development problem?

Development is important to a prosperous community, but it is also cyclic. You need homes for families to live. You need jobs for those families to pay for the homes. Those families grow and want to improve their standing, leading to more and higher paying jobs. Higher paying jobs come from better industry and better industry will move in when there are people to fill their job requirements and easy access to transportation. The people to fill those jobs are the children who go to school here and choose to stay because of higher paying jobs. Those grown children need homes to live in, completing the cycle. Without development, the economy will go stagnant, businesses will leave for better profit or better choice of employees, leaving less money in the economy. The government must then increase taxes to pay for services or reduce services, and the whole cyclic process comes to a grinding halt.

Development is not the real problem, but it contributes to the problem. A recent application for a new subdivision was for 500 new homes in about 200 acres. If there is ample open space for parks, wide enough roads for emergency vehicles, multiple entrances/exits, replanting of trees, and the homes are attractive and interesting, the subdivision can be a success. No one is arguing that such a subdivision is the problem. The problem is the effect on infrastructure. That infrastructure includes schools, roads, emergency services, water treatment, and others. Let’s take a look at each one.

SCHOOLS. The estimated number of school children in a 500 home subdivision is 300 children (2.6 people per household). When the 300 children try to go to school in the local public school system, classrooms become overcrowded, teachers are unable to give individual attention, children eat lunch at 10:30 in the morning or 2:30 in the afternoon, transportation is not available to bus the children to schools, students don’t have enough school books and must share, and overall education of our children suffers and is below average.

EMERGENCY SERVICES. The average time for a 911 vehicle to respond to a call is about 6 minutes. 6 minutes is wonderful and our County Paramedic Service is always working on ways to improve that response time. They are considering outstations in the corners of the county and increasing the number of paramedics that are on duty. That expansion is based on the current number of homes in the county. At any time, if there happens to be more than one or two emergencies in the county, some injured person is going to have to wait. For the family whose father passes away from a heart attack because paramedics were responding to an accident, it will be too late.

WATER AND SEWER. Our county water treatment system is one of the best in the country. Our current system is handling the flow of sewage well. But each month at Levy Court, there are additional requests to extend the county sewer outside of the boundaries it was designed to handle. There will have to be major modifications to the treatment plant to handle the growth that is to come in the next ten years. After one major overflow into the Mispillion River, polluting the river for weeks or months, it will be too late.

OTHER. Another service that is affected is trash pickup. Many in the county received a letter recently that is reducing their number of pickup days from two to one, and encouraging recycling. While recycling is a great idea for the environment and should be enforced rather than encouraged, one day a week pickup is going to strain many families’ trashbins.

ROAD CONGESTION. A recent Guest Commentary by J. Paul Jones, employed by a developer in Camden, stated that the developer is 100% responsible for on-site and entrance improvements. What developer would not want an attractive entrance leading to their subdivision? Most congestion does not occur at the entrance to a sub-division, Mr. Jones. Most congestion occurs where secondary roads meet primary roads. That could be anywhere from 2-5 miles away from a new sub-division. And while DeIDOT does have a policy for developers to contribute to major road construction, how many developers of new sub-divisions have actually contributed to the work that DeIDOT does to

improve grade or intersections? The question has been asked of nearly every application in front of the Levy Court Commissioners, "Do you have a commitment or contract with DelDOT to improve the road conditions all the way to a primary road?" In most cases the answer is no. I would think those developers would be listing those contributions in every media outlet they had access to. Does your employer have a list of Delaware roads that you have provided some portion of the funding to improve?

ROAD CONDITIONS. The condition of the roads is a concern as well. Most roads that lead to and from subdivision are not wide enough to handle compact cars passing each other, let alone busses, trucks, larger vehicles, and the legacy of our county, farm equipment. It has not happened yet, I hope and pray that it does not, but those road conditions are going to be a contributing factor to a major accident involving a school bus, and THAT is when something will be done about the problem. For the children and families affected, it will be too late. Every subdivision not in a municipality also can have the roads dedicated, turning them over to DelDOT for maintenance. DelDOT must find the funds to maintain those roads, also.

RURAL LEGACY. Finally, our legacy as a rural, agriculture-based community is at risk. More and more farmland is being purchased for development. Farmers who would sell their lands to live the rest of their lives in quiet comfort cannot be faulted for that dream. It is their right to earn money from their property, as is the right of any homeowner to turn a profit when the value of their home increases. How do we maintain our legacy while preserving property rights of the landowners?

Someone is going to have to pay for improving schools, roads, emergency services, trash pickup, sewer and water, and some method to entice farmers to preserve their land in an agricultural state. Some of these services, such as trash pickup, have been scaled back to once per week pickup instead of two. Some of these services, such as Paramedic Services, should be shared by all who live in Kent County, including those who live in municipal boundaries. Some of these services, such as road construction to reduce congestion, should be funded by the State government, which will more than likely continue to raise fees to fund such projects.

But all of these services should receive a fair share of funds from the one group that has affected the ability to deliver services effectively; the group that has done the most reduce to our ability to move around freely or to purchase a reasonably priced home; the group that has affected how quickly a paramedic can get to our home; the group that has affected our way of life in the most adverse way possible: Developers.

No it is not a development problem. It is an infrastructure problem. And to provide infrastructure costs money, which must come in the form of impact fees, filing fees, or taxes. As a lifelong county resident, and a homeowner who is not interested in paying to recover from the damage done by a few outsiders, taxes is not an option. The only way to recover from the situation we are in is through impact and filing fees that are used specifically to maintain adequate public facilities and infrastructure.