

# The Tee-Ball Approach to Development

(AND HOW TO AVOID IT)

by Jim Segedy, Ph.D., FAICP, and  
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If you've been a parent, a grandparent, an aunt, or an uncle, no doubt you've been to a tee-ball game. The youngsters on each team can hardly sit still in the dugout, and the bleachers are full of family members eager to cheer on their budding sports heroes. A pint-size batter steps up to the tee, winds up for the swing, and clips the ball, which rolls four or five feet towards the pitcher. The crowd goes wild, cheering as the batter runs as fast as little legs will go ... towards third base!

That's how it sometimes goes with our local communities' attempts at development. The community gets so excited about a proposed development that it can head off in the wrong direction – without having the infrastructure needed to support the development.

Some examples:

- A subdivision is approved in an area with lots too small for replacement septic drain fields and/or where the population density is too low to be feasibly served by public sewer.
- An office park is platted in an area where water lines are too small to provide adequate fire protection.
- A large retail/dining/lodging facility is proposed for an area where road capacity is already maxed out and there's no land available for additional parking.

In other words, communities are commonly enticed by development for which the infrastructure is inadequate. This not only burdens the community, it also minimizes the long-term return on private investment. It's just like a tee-ball player running the wrong direction.

Before we offer solutions on how to avoid unsustainable development, it makes sense to examine WHY this happens so frequently in communities. In many cases, it comes down to looking at only part of the equation: short-term



gains – without considering long-term, life-cycle costs.

If you find that recent developments have placed a burden on your water, sewer, roads, public safety, schools, and so on, this points to the need for some improvements to your community's planning and development strategies to ensure that the costs of community services are factored into your development review process.

[From Jim]. Let me share with you a story I used to tell my students: Imagine a farm. To make the math easy, let's say it's one hundred acres. The farmer, his wife, grandma, and the seven kids all live happily in the big farm house. Water comes from a well, they have a septic field, the sheriff stops by once a week for a piece of pie, and all seven kids ride the bus to school. That's about it.

Now, that same hundred acres has a proposal submitted for a subdivision. Nice suburban lots at four dwelling units per acre. That's perhaps 300 houses!

- 🏠 Probably won't work for each house to have its own well:
  - ➡ Public Cost #1: public water supply.
- 🏠 No way the septic fields can handle that kind of load, so the municipality will have to run sewers:
  - ➡ Public Cost #2: sewer lines, and
  - ➡ Public Cost #3: expanded sewage treatment plant.
- 🏠 At two kids per household, we're talking a lot more kids in the school:
  - ➡ Public Cost #4: more classrooms or perhaps a new school; and
  - ➡ Public Cost #5: a new park or playground.
- 🏠 You're also talking about:
  - ➡ Public Cost #6: another police officer and car.
  - ➡ Public Cost #7: expanded fire service.
  - ➡ Public Cost #8: more trash pick-up.

You get the point. Sure there is a higher tax rate for residential development than for a farm, and the municipality will gain in tax revenues, but the costs are usually higher. A variety of studies have shown that in the United States the cost of public services for new suburban residential development is about 15 percent greater than the increased tax revenue generated.<sup>1</sup>

## BENEFITS VS. IMPACTS

A community's permit review process is a good place to evaluate the benefits and impacts (including costs) of a proposed development. It is easy to get excited about any proposal that creates jobs these days. But what if the proposal

<sup>1</sup> See the Farmland Information Center's "Fact Sheet: Cost of Community Services," available at: [www.farmlandinfo.org](http://www.farmlandinfo.org). See also the Wisconsin Center for Land Use Studies' Cost of Community Services Project: [www.uwsp.edu/cnr/landcenter/COCS/COCS.html](http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/landcenter/COCS/COCS.html).

will cause a significant increase in the student population of your school (say, by 40 percent) and your school is already overcrowded? What if the proposed development will increase the community tax base by \$1 million after five years, but require \$2.5 million in immediate road improvements to create access and prevent traffic congestion?

If your municipality doesn't have a mechanism for accounting for the impacts and costs of new development (and/or a system of impact fees for offsetting these costs), the planning commission may want to take the lead in advocating for it.

A review of past developments in your community can shed light on impacts – both positive and negative. Compare the benefits generated (e.g., increased property tax revenues) against any costs or burdens (e.g., needed public road and sidewalk improvements; water and sewer line extensions; new school facilities) attributable to the developments.

### RIGHT DEVELOPMENT, WRONG LOCATION?

Perhaps your community is situated in a growth corridor. Population projections in your comprehensive plan indicate that your community will grow in the next decade. In that case, it is certainly reasonable to expect and even seek development.

As a planning commissioner, the best possible thing you can do for your community before you're hit with development requests is to establish priority areas for growth and then steer growth to those areas.

If you have vacant land that is already served by water and sewer, then those areas should be infilled before farmland

<sup>2</sup> See also Kate Lampton, "Developing a Sewer Ordinance: One Town's Experience," *PCJ#44*; [www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w366.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w366.html).

<sup>3</sup> According to the comprehensive web site, [impact-fees.com](http://impact-fees.com) (maintained by Duncan Associates), some 26 states authorize localities to adopt various kinds of development impact fees. A 2010 survey conducted by Duncan Associates (available on the web site) found the average impact fees assessed on a single-family residential unit totaled \$8,509 (excluding utility fees) — the largest component of this (\$4,835) being for schools.

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New growth should connect to what you already have rather than "leapfrogging" beyond your infrastructure service area.

To better ensure that growth aligns with your plan, there are a variety of measures a community can take. A few examples:

- streamline the permitting process for developers who request permits that are consistent with the plan.
- proactively "upzone" land (i.e., allow for higher densities) that has adequate facilities to accommodate growth (if no rezoning is required, that saves the developer time and money).
- adopt an "adequate public facilities ordinance," ensuring that adequate infrastructure is in place before development can be permitted.<sup>2</sup>
- consider the use of impact fees, if allowed by state law.<sup>3</sup>

### SETTING THE EXAMPLE

A comprehensive plan is intended to define a community's vision, provide for sustainable growth, ensure the adequacy of public facilities, and establish the public purpose for local regulations. This applies for the entire community, including both public and private developments.

When a local government ignores the comprehensive plan and permits new facilities without regard to the impacts on utilities, transportation, and future land use patterns, that action sends a powerful message to the community that

the plan doesn't matter. Every time a governing body approves a development permit that is not consistent with the comprehensive plan, it is a tacit comment on the plan's (lack of) value.

As planning commissioners, you are advocates for the comprehensive plan. You have a unique opportunity to help decision-makers embrace the plan and, when necessary, amend it to more accurately reflect the conditions, opportunities, and vision of the community. Your plan can be your ballfield, with the base lines painted neatly on the pages, so that whether your community hits a single or a homer, it will run in the right direction. ♦

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