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I found the statement by MPLC's Bill Concepcion as reported in last week's press - that use of public land for economic development should continue - rather disturbing. What's wrong with using private land for economic development? Why shouldn't private land be the main source of supply for big developers? Is MPLC engaging in unfair competition when it leases public land at give-away prices, throwing in all sorts of sweeteners, instead of encouraging developers to obtain their land on the open market?

It wouldn't be so bad if there were unlimited public land. But there isn't. In fact, it's already obvious that the homestead program cannot last much longer.

The argument that land being leased to developers will be returned to the public land "pool" at the end of those leases is based on a gamble - the gamble that land alienation laws will not change in the future. I hope that's true, but I wouldn't bet on it. I don't think MPLC should, either.

Maybe what's needed here is a re-definition of the purpose and use of public land. And a re-assessment of the public land use plan as well?

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It's interesting, but also somewhat discouraging, to discover how short some peoples' memories are. It's been only three short years since many of those in leadership positions attended CRM's conference on impact fees at Coral Ocean Point. At the time, it seemed as though one and all were persuaded that indeed, the time for impact fees - to help defray the expenses of development - had come, and pledged their support for implementation of an impact fee program.

The need for help in off-setting the costs of development has not lessened. If anything, the need for help has gotten bigger, with more and more demand for services in the face of ever-rising costs and shrinking resources. The demand for water, power, and sewer service grows daily; the schools grow more and more crowded; Saipan's roads show increasing deterioration; health care demands get heavier, and adequate police protection more critical. Yet there's been no growth in funds to meet those needs.

It would appear only logical to assess developers - for after all, it is they who have brought about this increase in infrastructure demand - for at least part of the cost of providing the services they require. Moreover, that would appear eminently more fair than taxing the rest of us through a cut in income tax rebates, as has been threatened.

Yet many of those same leaders now seem to have forgotten their earlier pledges of support for impact fees, seem to have lost their understanding of the rationale for making users pay for what they consume. Impact fees should be delayed, they should be lowered, they shouldn't be imposed at all, those leaders are arguing, claiming that impact fees would drive developers away.

To my understanding, developers are already paying an impact fee of sorts, in the way of "voluntary contributions." However, there are no rules or guidelines for the assessment of these "voluntary contributions," nor are there any controls over how such "contributions" are spent. Does anyone really believe that developers could find such a haphazard approach preferable to a predictable, equitable and logical impact fee

schedule?

Regrettably, our leaders also seem to have forgotten David Callies' caution that some impact fees are more defensible than others. To be safe, Callies recommended that the fees be tied directly to the additional costs incurred by developers, rather than being assessed at a flat rate, as is now under consideration by the legislature.

Among other things, implementation of an impact fee program would signal the U.S. Congress that the CNMI is taking responsible steps to becoming self-sufficient, that it is capitalizing on its own resources to meet its needs, that it is not the "give-away" spendthrift it is accused of being.