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Let’s Talk About Money

The Corbett administration, with great fanfare, is distributing $200 million in ‘impact fee’ revenue. “It must be good.” “It can’t be bad.” “It’s better than nothing.” These are some of the comments that I have heard concerning the impact fees. Let’s take a deeper look at this money and what it means for Pennsylvanians.

What is an impact fee? As the name implies, it is money shelled out to communities to remediate damages inflicted by gas drilling, and which will continue to be inflicted in the future.

The law requires local governments to spend this money only for certain items: water or sewage projects, training of EMS (to respond to the inevitable new emergencies), low-income housing, social services (counseling, drug and alcohol rehab, and job training), increased judicial workloads. But it can’t be used to retire debt or build libraries, nor for demolition of condemned buildings, maintaining structures or improving routine law enforcement (to protect citizens’ health, safety and welfare).

Even for those earmarked items, the impact fee will fall far short of covering the damage caused by the fracking industry. Maybe $200 million sounds like a big number, but compare it to $2-5 million to rebuild just one mile of two-lane road.

Now add up the costs for bridge and sewer repair, for putting one fireman, police or EMS on the street, for municipal planning, for drug, alcohol and job training. The is the actual bill (which taxpayers will ultimately need to cover) just for drilling’s immediate, direct costs. But that’s really just a down-payment.

Hasn’t Pennsylvania learned anything from its history of long-term legacy costs: acid mine water remediation, unplugged and orphaned wells, asbestos and uranium removal? Will we forget the pollution of our water and air, or ignore the toxic trespass of volatile organic compounds which have no borders? Or should we minimize the traffic, the noise and the decrease in property values that is imminent?

For comparison, remember the Exxon Valdez: In 2011, every citizen of Alaska received a direct-deposit check of $1,174 for this one-time impact on their state. On the other hand, if gas ‘impact fees’ were paid out to individuals, each Pennsylvanian would get all of $1.70. Still sound like a good deal?

Breaking it down, Bradford County was the biggest impact fee ‘winner’ (with the most holes punched in their county, and the most damages) at $21 million, or about $350 per person. And Butler County was impacted for $900 thousand, or $4.85 per person. As we can see, the ground is not the only thing getting “drilled “in this state!

Our Governor wants us to see this impact money as a windfall for revenue-starved municipalities. But that mindset doesn’t build sustainable futures. Once local governments start mainlining this money into their budgets, like that of a heroin addict, it will cause a whole host of new problems. To keep impact money coming, they will have to be advocates for the industry and its profits. Communities will look like pin cushions as the density of wells goes up. Competition for future gas projects will emerge, and a divide-and-conquer strategy will be in full bloom. Just as the addict needs his fix, communities will need their money. The competition will be vicious, communi-

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Frack Forum, Saturday, Nov. 17

Everyone concerned about fracking, new folks and old, will be welcome at our first Marcellus Protest “Frack Forum,” Saturday, November 17, from noon to 3:00 pm at the Friends Meeting House in Shadyside. [See our on-line calendar for directions.]

We’re observing the second anniversary of Pittsburgh’s trailblazing ban of fracking, which grew out of our city’s mass rally and demonstration, held in the face of a drilling industry trade show on November 3, 2010.

We’ll have a potluck meal, meeting and mingling, celebration and strategizing. Come, bring your contribution to our table and to our conversation.
Updated information on these topics (with links to original sources), along with our calendar of upcoming events, and other resources, can be found at www.marcellusprotest.org.