

When is a TIF not a TIF?

TO THE EDITOR:

The replacement referendum question to appear on the April 17th ballot is an 88-word complex sentence of which the last 34 words state: "provided that infrastructure needs of said development are not to be funded from existing municipal tax revenues but only from private sources and a portion of new tax revenues created by the development."

People, that is an Orwellian doublespeak for TIF.

So for the confused voter, this is the skinny. Vote yes and you support the development of Fish Lake Road, oh, by the way that just happens to be the Columbia Crossing development, oops, I mean the Columbia Crossings (forgot the s), development.

Vote no and you vote against the establishment of a tax increment financing authority at the Fish Lake development.

Actually, since this is an advisory referendum, your cast ballot does not vote for or against this project itself, but does show your elected officials how their voters base views this complex issue.

I would encourage every voter who lives within the Columbia City limits to educate himself or herself on the issue of tax increment financing authorities, to find out which candidates in your ward support your view, and on April 17 let your voice be heard and vote.

There is only going to be one chance at this issue for the voters. For once a government taxing entity like a TIF authority is created you will lose your voice in the matter for possibly up to 23 years.

Need information on TIF's? Google TIF districts positive and TIF districts negative.

Fred Stumpf
Columbia

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Development inevitable, questions necessary

TO THE EDITOR:

As a 15-year resident of Columbia, I have been reading with amusement and bemusement the saga of the Columbia Crossings predicament.

I am mostly on the fence on the subject because while growth is, alas, inevitable. How much it will affect me, Mr. Property Owner in Columbia CUSD4, still remains to be seen.

Will it affect my commute, bringing in hordes of traffic and disrupting my Interstate 255 and Illinois 3 runs? Will there be air, water, noise and light pollution as a result of this gigantic commercial and industrial enterprise nestled right up against Columbia's near north side? Will I miss the old days and find myself saying, "I remember when this all used to be farm fields!"

We all do that everyday around here anyway. So in light of all this I have a few open questions and comments for the players in this drama.

Mayor Kevin Hutchinson: You have gone out of your way to correct us all in what a tax increment financing district means and doesn't mean. Fine.

Now you do the math. We know for a fact this will vastly increase the total assessed valuation of the Columbia CU 4 District area and that number affects the formula that determines the state and federal aid that we get for our schools. And the school district, more than all other taxing bodies combined, makes up the vast majority of our property taxes.

What has been happening in Columbia over the past 15-20 years is we have been victims of our own success as expensive homes have been replacing cheap farmland. The total assessed valuation goes up and our state aid goes down so our taxes must go up to cover the difference. In 2007 a \$300,000 home can expect to pay \$6,000 in taxes a year.

I have family and friends in all four corners of this country and I can tell you that is very high. Heck, just ask our friends across the river in South St. Louis County what they are paying.

So I ask this of you Mr. Hutchinson: Promise me that

while you are telling me that TIF's don't take any money away from our coffers, the huge increase in assessed valuation in the CU4 taxing district formula will not cause my taxes to go up one penny.

If the development paid its fair share, my taxes should actually go way down. Will that happen? Remember, sales taxes don't offset our property taxes and don't go to the schools.

Former Mayor Lester Schneider: I have tremendous respect for you and what you have done for this city. I would even support a movement to have your name put on the new Columbia Middle School, since you were such a positive force during these past few formative years.

However, I think I, like many other Columbians, envisioned the Fish Lake overpass as a smallish, "Cracker Barrel" style arrangement with gas stations, restaurants and a few other businesses. Now we are suddenly faced with a 2,000 acre behemoth of a commercial/industrial complex with its supporting incessant truck and auto traffic, all in the name of "controlled growth".

I am not sure even you are capable of envisioning how huge this will be, running the entire length of I-255 from the east side of the Mississippi levees to Illinois 3, both north and south of the interstate.

This will be seven times bigger than G.J. Grewe's flagship development Gravois Bluffs (300 acres). The Jan. 6, 2005, Post Dispatch called this project "what is likely to be the single largest development in St. Louis history." Is that your idea of controlled growth?

By the way, Dupo is still, of course, going ahead with its \$1 billion, 2,000 acre, mixed use business park of its own just north of Columbia and Columbia Crossings. If I do the math right, the 20-25,000 new jobs promised by the mayor of Dupo should be matched by the G.J. Grewe project.

Where are the 40-50,000 newly employed people and their families going to go to live? Go to school? Go to shop? Do you think they will go back to Missouri from whence they came?

That number is more than the entire population of Monroe County. A loose guesstimate would have the entire student body of Columbia CU4 doubled. We would quickly need two or even three new schools. Who is going to pay

for them if there is TIF's used to promote this development? Again, you call this controlled?

I don't want to see Columbia become the next St. Charles and St. Peters. I moved here to get away from all that.

Scott Schumacher: The fact the paper reported you were "represented by Jim Mello, also an attorney for the preferred developer of Columbia Crossing, G.J. Grewe" draws attention to your motivation. Why didn't you want to see what the people of our community feel on this issue? What possibly possessed you to file an objection, citing technicalities, to reverse what hundreds of Columbians said they wanted by their signatures?

Need I remind you and the elected officials you teamed with of what the people of this community have done to others in the past who have tried to pull fast one on the citing "technicalities"? Look no further than Leonard Defabio's plight when he got Julie Gummershimer's election to the county coroner thrown out on a technicality. He was smoked in the next election.

And more recently when Jeff Hamilton had Jay Unnerstall's name pulled off the aldermanic ballot on a technicality. He was shown the door by the electorate of Columbia's 2nd Ward as they elected Unnerstall as a write in. We don't like people who try to pull stunts to get their way.

Their victories are usually short lived. Not that you were wrong or anything. But neither were those people listed above. You may see some officials associated with your position paying a heavy political price next election. The advisory referendum was non-binding. What were you all afraid of?

Citizens 4 Columbia: You mean well but your cries of small town way of life will be met with more rolled eyes than you can shake a stick at.

Now that Schumacher and company have won (sort of), your only recourse is perhaps to try to work with the question the City Council allowed. While slightly slanted in its wording (making it sound like if you vote No you are against "future continued prosperity and economic growth"), you will still hopefully get a feeling for how those of us in the 62236 ZIP code feel about the whole thing.

Another is perhaps to try to

work with the system to make the development that we do get more palatable. Think parks, green space, bike trails and such (I for one would love to bike ride around the bottoms area with my kids without having to worry about getting knocked into a ditch by a speeding pickup).

Remember, Dupo won the battle of the overpasses and they will be making their mega-project anyway. It will be so close to Columbia and Columbia Crossings it probably won't matter what Columbians think. The angle just might be to stop and ask the Crossing's developers and supporters if they have taken into consideration the huge impact Dupo's project will have on Columbia's. They will bleed business from each other such that neither supporter's estimates will mean too much.

Regardless of whose numbers are right, the reality is the bottoms as we know them will be changing forever. The only thing we can do is decide if will we try to control it and tailor it to something we all can live with and enjoy or if we will allow overzealous developers to be handed rubber stamps to do what ever they want to the area.

Columbia and northern Monroe County have been the best kept secret in the St. Louis Metropolitan area for years, but now the secret is out. I would like for the people of Columbia, through our elected officials acting on our behalf, to continuously reserve the final right of refusal on what happens in this development to keep things in line and make it something that we can be proud of and that raises all boats around here (yet doesn't raise our taxes). That way we can cap it off if things out of hand (example: 500 new kids show up in our schools in five years or some other calamity).

And if any developer says they will not do it without TIF's, kickbacks, rubber stamps and such, let them move on. We are certainly an attractive enough location we can find developers who will.

Gregory John Grohman
Columbia