No tax dollars for developers

A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled.

We were reminded of the words of Sir Thomas George Barnett Cocks, a long-ago clerk in British Parliament, when the Smithfield Town Council opted for delay instead of action last week on Councilman Michael Smith's worthy proposal to make official what a majority of his colleagues say they support: a ban on taxpayer subsidization of for-profit development.

Smith has his work cut out for him in making sure his idea avoids the fate Cocks so eloquently described. Councilman Jeff Brooks had no sooner seconded Smith's motion than their colleagues and Town Attorney Bill Riddick started throwing darts at it.

The best objection we heard — Riddick's point that state law sometimes requires local governments to cover the incremental cost of expanding developer-funded infrastructure — can be fixed with six simple words at the end of the policy: "except when required by state law." No committee necessary.

Smith, who will serve on the committee with colleagues Randy Pack and Raynard Gibbs, must make sure that the policy is not weakened to the point of defeating its purpose.

There's no reason to overthink what is obvious: Smithfield is a highly desirable place for private investment, thus, unlike less fortunate and less successful communities, doesn't have to subsidize for-profit residential and mixed-use projects. Period.

One of the most disingenuous objections to Smith's motion was that it's a solution in search of a problem. Just last year, developer Joseph Luter IV literally sent town and county officials a consultant-drafted plan calling for taxpayers in both localities to fund $7 million of infrastructure for his Grange at 10Main mixed-use development on the former Pierceville property, in addition to the $2.8 million that the town and county had already committed to a Grange building that would house the town's farmers market.

Fortunately, our Stephen Faleski blew up the plan by making taxpayers aware of it. Citizens reacted as you would expect: They weren't happy. It's important and timely that town leaders go on the record now, lest future developers have any similar notions.

The policy must not be limited to residential development. So-called mixed-use projects often seek public funding to add profit for their developers or, at minimum, reduce their risk. If the policy doesn't cover mixed-use projects, it will be too easy for future developers to do what Luter did with the Grange: Add a "public" component (farmers market stalls) to for-profit facilities (a restaurant and retail shops), then claim that taxpayers are funding "public" infrastructure.

We agree with Councilman Jim Collins that the policy shouldn't restrict industrial recruitment. If a large company wants to put a factory or its headquarters in the town limits, elected leadership should have the flexibility to incentivize that investment. But that verbiage can be crafted in 15 minutes or less by smart fellows like Gibbs, Pack and Smith.