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Viewpoint: St. Joseph County officials seemed to favor big business over community concerns

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Every St. Joseph County resident should be concerned about what happened in county government last week.

On the surface, the Board of Commissioners passed a resolution from New Carlisle. The county council approved two rezonings for a combined 733 acres of agricultural land to industrial.

What really won was a back door for what has been billed as the ninth largest mega-industrial complex in the United States, the Indiana Enterprise Center. What lost were good governance and the common good.

There are many issues facing us right now. This summer alone St. Joseph County residents fought for increased absentee voting, a South Bend civilian police review board, more support for those who are houseless and racial justice. We have fought against continued gun violence, lead poisoning, political polarization and COVID-19.

We, the people of St. Joseph County, are active and want thriving, just, safe communities. We sign petitions, go to meetings and protests, demand change. What we don't always do is connect the dots.

And the dots are money.

Board of Commissioners President Andy Kostielney, Commissioner Deb Fleming and seven County Council members keep saying yes to an unfettered Economic Development Office and Redevelopment Commission, which have spent millions on the speculative hope that big development will come without answering the question of if big development will benefit the people and environment of St. Joseph County.

Hundreds of people have opposed the IEC. We have signed petitions, written letters to the editor, gone to meetings of elected and appointed officials at the town, township and county levels of government.

And yet, the county council voted for rezonings in the IEC area despite very vocal opposition for the past two-and-a-half years.

And the “opposition” (residents who care deeply about where they live) has simply asked the county council and board of commissioners to pause and think.

Spread-out development creates costly financial burdens primarily due to large, unsustainable infrastructure costs. County officials have provided no public data about these expected costs, which a mega-industrial complex covering thousands of acres would incur.

It seems the Board of Commissioners majority — Kostielney and Fleming — are unconcerned with limits. And they can enable the Economic Development Office and Redevelopment Commission to spend money because the New Carlisle TIF district is now effectively a slush fund to enable consultants and big developers to come in at the expense of the common good.

TIF districts began with a purpose: to capture tax money for a blighted area that can be used only within that area for purposes of economic development. Brownfields can become sites for future work — neighborhoods can thrive again. However, in the state of Indiana, that definition widened. TIF districts can be set up on greenfields or what is known as “vacant land.” In this area, “the vacant land” is prime farmland, some of the best in the country.

The taxes in the TIF district stay in that district for economic development. A new business comes into the area and its tax base stays within those lines. So, no, the taxes created don’t go to the library system, 911 center or the health department for lead abatement—they stay right there for more “economic development.”

Jamie O’Brien was right when he wrote, “It is also the right time to end the money-pit tax increment financing (TIF) that steals tax dollars from other taxing units.” (Viewpoint, Aug. 29)

But let’s connect those dots. There may be a shortfall of money, yes, but there are also millions and millions of dollars in county (and city) TIFs. Yet, important issues compete against each other for an ever-shrinking amount of money whereas TIFs — money for businesses — grow. The decisions by county leaders to open the door to the IEC will make

this situation worse.

Enough truly is enough. It's time to take back our taxes from TIF districts and from officials who believe in mega-industrial development rather than local and sustainable development. We will protect prime farmland, the Kankakee aquifer and rural communities in the process and we will also make gains on what you are all working on, a better community. It's time we demand accountability from elected officials who seem to desire big business more than community concerns. Let's do this together — connect the dots and demand better governance.