

As a former newspaper editor and reporter, I understand that newspapers can and frequently should express opinions about public issues. What I do not understand is why a newspaper would offer opinions built on the back of misrepresentations and omissions of fact.

I refer to the editorial “District stifles development,” which appeared in *The Herald Republican* on August 18, 2011. In that editorial, the writer stated the newspaper’s opinions that the Steuben Lakes Regional Waste District’s billing policies and practices are “unfriendly to development” and “possibly prevent development.” The culprit, the editorial alleged, is a policy of charging the owners of vacant lots for sewer service.

That allegation is simply untrue, and the writer of the editorial would have known that if she or he had picked up the phone and talked with someone at the District office. The District does not, as a matter of policy, charge the owner of a vacant parcel for sanitary sewer service.

The only instances in which the District has charged the owners of vacant parcels are those in which the owner asked the District to install a sewer line or other equipment on the parcel. In those instances, it was only fair that the District charge the owner for service because the owner, in effect, asked the District to reserve wastewater transmission and treatment capacity in its systems and to make a capital investment in the property for the owner’s benefit.

The editorial also alleged that bidders at the recent auction of property owned by Bledsoe’s, Inc., were discouraged from bidding higher on that part of Bledsoe’s property where the trailer park was located because those bidders were told they would be charged “for each and every one” of the vacant lots in the trailer park “once the property was purchased.” Once again, a phone call to the District office would have shown the editorial writer how inaccurate the unnamed bidders who appeared to be the writer’s sources were.

The District charges property owners according to how they use their properties. In the

case of Bledsoe's, Inc., as part of a court-approved settlement agreement, the District gave Bledsoe's the opportunity to tell the District how many mobile home sites and how many campsites it would make available to the public so that the District could charge Bledsoe's according to the District's rate ordinance and the terms of the agreement. Bledsoe's never did so. The District therefore has been charging Bledsoe's according to previously gathered information about the property's use.

Potential bidders who talked with District officials before the auction were told that if they intended to use the property in the same way and to the same extent that Bledsoe's, Inc. was using it they would be billed in the same way. They also were told that if they reduced the number of sites that were made available to the public or if they installed the proper metering devices or if they changed how the property was going to be used the District would work with them to adjust the charges in accordance with the District's rate ordinance.

The editorial's statement that the District charges property owners year round regardless of whether they occupy their properties year round is true, but to throw out that fact as evidence that year-round charges discourage development without also examining the reasons for the practice is misleading.

Just as the businesses and industries that *The Herald Republican* wants the District to foster have to pay employees, capital and debt service costs, and operating expenses year round, so too does the District. Those expenses do not vary greatly from one month to another, and the District has to be assured of a steady and reasonably certain revenue stream in order to meet them. Moreover, monitoring whether property owners are at home or in Florida so that they would be charged only when they are at home would be a significant additional expense, both in capital and administrative costs, that would have to be borne by all rate-payers.

Nowhere in the statutes that govern regional sewer districts are they charged with encouraging or promoting economic development. That is the purpose of a host of other state and local agencies.

Instead, the purpose of regional sewer districts is to “provide for the collection, treatment, and disposal of sewage inside and outside the district,” according to the laws that govern the formation and operation of the districts. The goal of those districts, as evidenced by where the governing statutes are found in the state’s code, is cleaner water for Indiana communities.

The owners of vacant parcels who asked the District to connect their properties to the District’s lines did so because they intended to sell their properties and they believed they could get a better price for them with sewer service than without sewer service. If the District has a role to play in fostering development, it is that. It provides a service that improves the quality of life and thereby adds value to already valuable property.