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Editorial: Bearing an unfair share

Natural gas development is filling Wyoming's state coffers with cash and its roads with potholes.

When the upcoming budget session rolls around in February, lawmakers need to ensure that the impacts of development are being addressed with adequate funding.

A group of community leaders wants the state to set aside \$100 million to help counties and towns cope with the effects of rapid energy development. That's a good idea, but it's important that any state money set aside for local purposes be used for clearly defined, proven impacts.

As a result of ongoing development, the state can expect to see impacts such as damage to roads, overburdened waste management systems, drained resources in the health care sector or additional needs for public safety funding.

But the state shouldn't hand out money with no strings attached. State money should mean state oversight. If a community needs state money to add health care staff at an overloaded clinic, the money shouldn't go for a new swimming pool.

Part of the need for the fund is a result of the relatively long process for assessing mineral extraction taxes, which causes a delay between the impact of development and the local revenue from it. An impact fund could help communities buffer that lag.

In 2004, \$10 million was set aside to be distributed through the Local Government Coordinating Council to affected communities, but more is needed.

The state in the past also has required the establishment of impact fees for large-scale, singular projects. So it makes sense to have a mechanism to address large-scale development that happens in many places at once, too.

The Wyoming communities that are experiencing the heaviest development are bankrolling a billion-dollar surplus that will benefit all of the state for generations. If the state sets aside a portion of that surplus to ensure that those towns and counties don't suffer irreparable harm, that's an appropriate use.