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## \$64,000 impact fee stuns Marco Island eatery

### Chefs' Express customers donate bills to help pay

BY DON MANLEY • don@misuntimes.com •  
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**6:16 A.M.** — Customers are showing their support for the Feinman family one dollar bill at a time.

The family owns the Chefs' Express restaurant, a small business in the Shops of Olde Marco.

After a January move into a larger unit at the plaza, the Feinmans received a surprise - a bill for \$64,000 in sewage-system impact fees from the city of Marco Island that could force the restaurant to close.

"Hopefully in their wisdom, the city will get this worked out to help us bypass these impact fees that are astronomical," said Rick Feinman.

But patrons are coming to the rescue.

One of the popular bistro's windows is decorated with paper money customers have donated to help the owners pay the fee.

Most are \$1 bills, but there are \$5 and \$20 bills interspersed, as well as foreign currency.

The bills all bear messages of support for the Feinmans - or distaste with the city's levying the fee.

The family greatly appreciates the symbolic gesture.

"In these economic times, we need all the support that we can get from everybody, especially the city, to make this thing work," Rick Feinman said.

The impact fee issue came to a head in September when Rick Feinman went to the city building to pick up a permit for the new electric meter that had to be installed as part of the move.

He was told the fee would have to be paid first.

However, it's North Marco Utilities - not the city - that provides service to The Shops of Olde Marco.

Craig Woodward, the Feinmans' attorney and owner

of North Marco Utilities, notified the city by letter last year that the strip mall was served by his company.

Woodward is lobbying the city to forego the fees for Chefs' Express.

Anne Feinman, Rick Feinman's wife and Lauren Feinman's mother, made a tearful, impassioned plea to have the permit released at the Oct. 18 Marco City Council meeting.

The permit was released the next day, but the fee levy continued.

Lauren Feinman said the idea for the display sprang from a customer who visited the restaurant the day after the council meeting.

"He signed a dollar bill with his name and he said 'Here's a dollar donation toward your impact fees,'" Lauren Feinman said. "We thought it was a joke and it was kind of funny so we put it up on the window."

That encouraged other diners to contribute.

Some of the messages on the bills would not get even a PG rating.

"People were putting stuff (on the bills) that was actually vulgar that we had to cover up because they were so angry with the city," Lauren Feinman said.

There are about 60 bills on the window, up from about 40 two weeks ago, said Lauren Feinman.

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She particularly fancies one bill.

"We even had a table that was from the Bahamas and he gave us a Bahamian dollar," Lauren Feinman said. "He said, 'I don't know if you can use this toward the fees, but I'd like to contribute.' I thought that was really cool. That one is in the center of the window. That one's my favorite."

Losing Chefs' Express would be a blow to the plaza, said Katherine Douglas, owner of the Amantea Gallery, located on the other side of the courtyard.

"The little businesses in here like mine, really depend on the (foot) traffic that Chefs' Express generates," Douglas said. "They're going to put us all out of business. It doesn't seem that the city is making an effort to support businesses in these difficult economic times when we're all struggling."

The outpouring of support has made her value the business more and brought the family closer, said Lauren Feinman.

"It's not something we asked for, but we'll take anything we can get," Rick Feinman said. "... We're a mom and pop, a dying breed of restaurateurs."

Feinman added: "I'm sure with council's wisdom and knowledge, that they're going to help a small business owner be able to prosper and grow - that they'll do the right thing."

The council has directed the city staff to weigh the implications of temporarily waving commercial impact fees to foster business expansion and growth.

Chefs' Express is at 176 Royal Palm Drive in the Shops of Olde Marco. Call 393-2433. Go to [thechefsexpress.com](http://thechefsexpress.com).



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