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Builders may pay more for Lee parks 45 percent impact-fee increase is considered

By Ryan Hiraki
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Originally posted on July 11, 2007

A 40-acre site in Pine Island sits empty.

To clear the exotic Brazilian pepper and melaleuca trees to make way for a park, people might have to pay more to build a home, hotel or motel next year in Lee County.

County officials are considering a 45 percent increase for park impact fees, the one-time charge to cover the cost of new parks. It's a cost usually passed on to the home buyer or consumer.

This could become the second consecutive year the county raises an impact fee after deciding to raise road fees last year.

A person building a single-family home could pay \$2,150 instead of \$1,479 by January or February if commissioners approve the new fees in the fall, possibly in October.

This week, the county released a report from Texas consultant Duncan Associates that suggests higher fees are needed. The fees are updated every three years, and this time, they would help pay for about 90 more acres of park land, more than half of which have yet to be identified.

Park fees are a solution county officials have relied on to accommodate growth since their creation in 1985, while members of the construction industry have fought against them, especially increases.

"With the population growth, you have more demand for parks," said Mary Gibbs, the county's community development director. "How do you fund them?"

Right now, with impact fees. Otherwise, it might be higher taxes or user fees, Gibbs said.

Commissioners recently tripled their impact fees for roads, an effort to relieve traffic. Someone who builds a single-family home now pays almost \$9,000 in roads fees, along with fees for fire, emergency medical and water and sewer services. That can push fees to more than \$15,000 for permits to build a home.

Michael Reitmann, executive vice president of the association, reacted the way he usually does to higher impact fees: with disdain.

"This is absolutely the wrong time to raise any kind of fees because of economic conditions," he said.

The real estate market is struggling here, the same way it is around the country. That's a reason the county does not need higher fees, Reitmann said.

"Lots in Lehigh that were up to \$65,000 are down to \$25,000."

Lehigh Acres joins Pine Island and south Fort Myers as communities in the county that are targeted for more parks.

There are enough parks, according to the required numbered in the county's growth plan, said Dan Calvert, a planning coordinator.

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The 90 acres, he said, would satisfy the green space county officials desire.

Reitman said the county should come up with a create way to pay for them.

Reitmann also warned that officials need to stimulate growth, not hinder an economic engine the county depends on.

"If there's no growth, who do you think is going to pick up the slack (to pay for amenities)? It's the average citizen."

South Fort Myers resident Don Davis, 65, said impact fees are necessary for the parks and quality of life people move here to enjoy.

He coached Little League for 18 years until stepping down recently, now that his three boys are in college.

"Little League was the time of their life," Davis said.

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