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Businesses, builders decry impact fee hike

By CINDY SWIRKO

Sun staff writer

Developers, builders and business owners told Alachua County commissioners at a packed workshop Tuesday that proposed impact-fee increases will stymie growth and hurt the economy.

Some of the transportation fees, particularly those for businesses that create lots of traffic, would rise steeply under the proposal. Opponents say that new growth is already paying for itself through increased property tax revenue.

"I would suggest that growth pays for itself more than one might think," said Mike Walsh, chairman of the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce. "I would suggest that significantly slowing down or stopping growth is a slippery slope."

Most of the 12 speakers during public comment opposed the fee increases. Among the three proponents was Gladys Lane of Women for Wise Growth, a watchdog group.

"When I explain this to people, they say that, of course, new growth should pay for new growth," Lane said. "Why are we neglecting to give our citizens the quality of life they deserve?"

The fees are levied only in the unincorporated area and not in any of the cities. County impact fee coordinator Jonathan Paul said the proposed increases were based in part on the escalating cost of road construction.

Paul said it costs about \$2.55 million to build a mile of road per lane, under 2006 estimates from the state Department of Transportation. That is up from \$1.25 million in 2004.

Paul added that it generally costs government more to build a road than a private developer because of legal requirements on everything ranging from minority hiring to building stormwater facilities.

"There have been significant increases in the cost of roadway construction," Paul said. "These numbers form the foundation for the proposed fees."

The current general residential impact fee is \$1,052 per 1,000 square feet. The proposed impact fee is \$2,439 per 1,000 square feet. The fee would be lower for homes in subdivisions with a traditional neighborhood design but higher for those in rural agricultural areas.

Most commercial fees are now \$3,814 per 1,000 square feet, but varying fees will be charged under the proposal.

A large-scale superstore, for instance, would be charged \$29,785 per 1,000 square feet. A convenience store/gas station would pay \$25,618 per pump.

The differences are based on the traffic generated by the business.

Also proposed was an automatic increase tied to an inflation factor based on state and federal road construction costs.

Several options also were presented, including a 15 percent discount from the proposed rate. Another option includes phasing in the increases over time.

Commissioners Rodney Long and Cynthia Chestnut were not at the workshop but sent word that they generally favor the increases. Lee Pinkoson was the only commissioner who spoke in opposition to them.

"If we don't get it right, it's going to have a terrible effect on the community," Pinkoson said.

Commissioner Mike Byerly said new growth is not paying its share through property taxes alone.

"We are not taking in as much revenue as the increase in expenditures for the new growth," Byerly said.

The workshop briefly got quarrelsome when Byerly got permission to ask a question during Paul's presentation.

Pinkoson then began questioning Paul. County Manager Randall Reid asked Pinkoson if he would let Paul finish his presentation. Pinkoson said Reid was trying to cut him off because Reid has a different opinion on impact fees.

Chairwoman Paula DeLaney jumped in and the presentation resumed.

"This is a discussion we can have in which people fundamentally disagree. Everybody's position is legitimate," DeLaney said. "I don't want us to get defensive - it's a little early in the discussion for that."

Commissioners are expected to hold a formal public hearing and vote on the increases in August.

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