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South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Florida cities and counties raising fees to offset losses from property tax cuts

Some services cut, but others will be costlier

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July 21, 2007

TALLAHASSEE Cities and counties across Florida are tightening their belts as they face a state-ordered cut in property-tax collections ranging as high as 9 percent this year.

But local governments are finding other ways to tap into residents' wallets.

Scores are slapping higher fees on everything from water, sewer and fire protection to burial plots, overdue library books, admission to parks and pools and garbage pickup.

The fee increases threaten to erase some or all of the initial savings in property taxes, which lawmakers put at \$174 for the average homeowner this year.

"It certainly is an attempt to circumvent the will of the Legislature to reduce property taxes," said House Rules Chairman David Rivera, R-Miami. "I can only hope that the public will remember these fee increases when it comes time to re-elect these local officials."

Kissimmee city commissioners last month more than doubled a stormwater utility fee, from \$3 to \$6.50 a month and created a fire protection fee expected to cost a homeowner \$5.30 a month and businesses even more. The result: homeowners would pay \$105.60 more next year than they do now.

Winter Park is considering a fire-service fee, as well as a 12 percent increase in its stormwater utility fee. Mount Dora may raise charges for burial spaces at the city's Pine Forest Cemetery.

And in Oviedo, fees charged for development applications and building permits have been tripled after a city analysis found charges weren't covering costs.

"The development service fee analysis was something we had been thinking about," City Manager Gerald Seber said. "But property tax reform certainly provided us the incentives to get off our duffs."

The new development services fees, which increased on average about 200 percent, began July 1 and reflect 50 percent of the real cost.

Jacksonville Mayor John Peyton topped all Florida communities considering fee increases by proposing a \$26.5 million



package of new fees for next year, including new charges for residential garbage pickup and water treatment as well as a surcharge on electricity provided by a city-owned utility.

Some Jacksonville homeowners are likely to pay more in fees than what they save on property tax bills next year, officials acknowledged.

"Property tax revenue used to pay for a lot of these services in Jacksonville," said John Wayne Smith, a lobbyist for the Florida League of Cities. "When the tax money isn't there, and people want the services, they're going to feel the pinch."

Across Florida, the story this summer is much the same, with cities and counties unveiling budget plans that eliminate some programs while increasing fees for many of the surviving services.

Charlotte County is considering tripling road and drainage fees. Broward County is looking to increase the cost of going to parks on weekends, returning overdue library books and licensing pets.

The city of North Miami Beach is proposing to boost the cost of using three municipal swimming pools. Hollywood is planning higher fees for recreational programs.

A push by many counties to increase impact fees assessed on new home construction is drawing the wrath of the Florida Home Builders Association. Impact fees can add thousands of dollars to the price of a home.

Counties levy these charges to offset the cost of new roads, utilities and other services tied to construction, and the builders' group anticipates that governments will turn to them more frequently as tax dollars dry up.

The association earlier threatened to stop campaign contributions to incumbent lawmakers who refused to endorse legislation capping impact fees, a move that drew angry reactions from lawmakers.

The association has dropped the threat but remains committed to capping fees. "There really is an avalanche of impact fees out there now," said Edie Ousley, an association spokeswoman.

The builders say Alachua and Lake counties are considering boosts of as much as 400 percent in impact fees, while Collier County, which charges \$30,000 on a new home, is considering going higher.

House Speaker Marco Rubio, R-West Miami, who led the charge to cut property taxes this year, said fee increases are more fair — and more visible — than taking advantage of soaring real estate prices to collect more property taxes, as cities and counties have done in the past few years.

"Fees are clear, they're not hidden," Rubio said. "If you don't like that city and county officials are raising them, you can vote them out of office on Election Day."

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