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Are high impact fees hurting Coweta?

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Coweta County transportation impact fees may be so high that they are hurting the county, but dropping \$25 million in road projects from the impact fee list won't necessarily make those fees go down.

A public hearing was held Thursday by the Coweta County Commission on the annual update to the county's "capital improvements element" -- the legal basis for impact fees. The CIE outlines the projects that will be done with impact fees.

Tavores Edwards, Coweta's transportation planner, gave the presentation on the CIE update. He said he wanted to give the commissioners a chance to look at the list of road projects and make any changes. There have been discussions about two projects, in particular, that might be able to be completed by private developers in the future.

Those projects include the extension of Newnan Crossing Boulevard from Poplar Road southward to U.S. 29 and the extension of Amlajack Boulevard in Shenandoah Industrial Park, to tie into the Coweta Industrial Park at Ga. Hwy. 154.

The county has calculated the impact fees so that they will cover half the cost of the road projects in the CIE. The total for those two projects is \$25 million.

Edwards said he talked to Bill Ross, the consultant who did Coweta's impact fees plan, and "he said that really wouldn't do anything because we're collecting at 50 percent right now. If we were collecting at 100 percent, it would be more detrimental."

Adding projects, though, would raise the fees and require a lot of technical work.

The reason dropping the two projects was discussed is that "we are concerned our transportation impact fee is so high that it is encouraging all kinds of different behaviors," Commissioner Leigh Schlumper said.

The county's fees are high enough that property owners and developers are finding it cheaper to be annexed into the city of Newnan and pay Newnan's impact fees, she said.

"We're not doing ourselves any favors" by encouraging that, Schlumper said. "If they annex, we still end up with the same transportation issues. We're just in a position where we can't collect impact fees,"

Schlumper said.

However, it is possible that the city would agree to collect impact fees on behalf of the county.

In some cases, Coweta's transportation impact fees are lower than the city's, but typically they are higher.

For a 5,000-square-foot general office building, Coweta would charge \$3,200 and Newnan would charge \$4,274.

But for a 5,000-square-foot convenience store with gas pumps, developers would pay \$49,315 in Newnan compared to \$107,300 in Coweta.

For a 30,000-square-foot supermarket, developers would be charged \$44,629 to locate in Newnan and \$133,650 to locate in the county.

And for a 10,000-square-foot bank with a drive-through, developers would pay \$31,278 in Newnan and \$102,600 in Coweta.

Edwards said Ross suggested the county keep those projects, because if developers build them, they can then ask for a credit from the fees.

The way to lower the fees is to revisit the methodology used to calculate them, Edwards said. The county needs to forward the CIE to the Chattahoochee-Flint Regional Development Center for review. The plan must be reviewed and voted on by the commissioners by the end of October so that Coweta won't lose its "qualifying local government status."

Of particular concern is the Amlajack Collector, which would get some \$11 million in impact fees. The Coweta Industrial Park and anything that locates in it is exempt from all fees.

"We're collecting from everybody but them to do an \$11 million project on their property," Schlumper said.

"Which is why I brought it to your attention," Edwards said.

Chairman Tim Higgins said he would like to consider adding an extension of Werz Industrial Boulevard that would tie into Bledsoe Road in Shenandoah Industrial Park to the CIE. Commissioner Tim Lassetter said he thought the other two projects would be more important than the Werz extension. But "I'm not sure that I think that any of them should be on here."

The Boulevard extension would go right by the proposed Piedmont Newnan Hospital at Poplar Road and Interstate 85. The terrain through the area would make it a very expensive project, Edwards said.

Speaking at the public hearing was local developer and real estate businessman Jim Mottola. He said the Amlajack Extension is listed as a developmental road. He doesn't think impact fees should be used for a developmental road.

Mottola also thinks having a new Interstate 85 interchange at Amlajack in the CIE is questionable when "it is so much of a dream."

The Boulevard extension would be nice, but the hospital plans "pretty much did away with any possibility of that road ever coming through there. They didn't want it to go through their campus," Mottola said.

The Bledsoe connection, however, is essential, he said.

When Millard Farmer Industrial Boulevard is widened, Werz Industrial will be a right in/right out intersection only, Mottola said. "All the traffic coming from the interstate (when leaving the Werz area) will have to come back out Werz, turn right, and have to go find somewhere to make a turn," Mottola said.

Trucks coming from Carrollton headed south on Millard Farmer wouldn't be able to take a left onto Werz. They would likely have to continue on the bypass, possibly across Bullsboro to Ashley Park, until they found a place to turn around and come back to Werz.

Werz Industrial Boulevard, where the Coweta School System has its instructional offices, is essentially a dead-end street. It ties into a traffic circle in the Calumet subdivision, but that route is not truck friendly.

"Without that connection, you're going to have a real mess," Mottola said.

As for the Amlajack interchange, said Coweta Administrator Theron Gay, the commissioners will soon be asked if they want to participate in an interchange justification report for the project. The request is coming from the Georgia Department of Transportation, which means the interchange might not be just a dream after all.

The commissioners will consider the CIE at their Tuesday meeting at 6 p.m.

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