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[LAKELAND CITY COMMISSION]

Bad Timing To Index Impact Fees

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At its meeting today, the Lakeland City Commission is scheduled to consider a proposal to index impact fees to the rate of inflation. The plan makes abundant sense, but the timing of it makes very little.

With an annual index in place, instead of taking large bites every few years, an amount can be added (or subtracted, should deflation ever come) in small steps. And those amounts should be fairly predictable.

Impact fees are applied to new residential and commercial construction to offset the costs providing additional services for growth. The first increase is an example of small bites: Impact fees for a single-family home would go up \$16 to pay for fire protection; \$25 to pay for police; and \$245 to pay for parks. The total impact fee for a new home would be \$3,777, an overall increase of 8.2 percent.

In dollars, that would be less than \$300 - hardly an amount that draws attention on a home costing in the five or six figures.

And any other time, the index would probably draw solid support from Lakeland commissioners. But with building permits still on a slippery slope, with oil-barrel prices showing little tiring of their upward trend, and with the economy facing a long, hot summer, luke-warm has been the best the idea can do on either the city or county level. county rejected the idea Two weeks ago, Polk County commissioners considered an index amount that would come annually, starting with a 2.66 percent increase. Commissioner Jack Myers moved to reject it, citing the economy; Randy Wilkinson seconded the motion; Sam Johnson indicated there would be a majority vote to kill it.

In the end, the vote to reject the index plan was unanimous, although there were understandable concerns about doing so: "We have a 10-year plan and we cannot have a knee-jerk reaction to ups and downs, but there is flexibility in the plan and we can get by this year without indexing," said Commissioner Bob Johnson.

Added colleague Jean Reed: "It really concerns me to get behind. This is a difficult year to index."

Lakeland commissioners are looking at the same situation. Like the county, Tallahassee is placing restraints on how much local property taxes can be raised. Other revenue sources - like impact fees and permit costs - are becoming more

important.

At a work session a week ago, three commissioners were against enacting the index (Mayor Buddy Fletcher; Commissioners Howard Wiggs and Glenn Higgins); three were in favor (Gow Fields, Edie Yates and Jim Verplanck).

That left Commissioner Justin Troller, who held out a sideways thumb when the show of hands was taken. "I'm not only concerned about our current residents, but our future ones, too," he explained.

It's easy to understand Troller's dilemma. Growth should pay for itself, and that means raising impact fees when costs go up. Yet the economy has slowed growth considerably; bogged down by other sectors of the economy, should it be further burdened - even by a small amount?

Not today. But neither should commissioners leave the idea twisting in the wind. A lot can change in six months. Revisit the index plan then.

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never gets it right, or at least only rarely gets it right. Perhaps that occurs because when the government does get some program right, the first instinct is to "reform"...

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