

Published Thursday, January 21, 2010

Commissioners reworking methodology for impact fees

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The Times-Herald

The latest set of proposed changes to Coweta County's impact fees reduces the fees for transportation, but not enough to suit the Coweta County Commissioners.

The commissioners heard a presentation on the draft amendment to the impact fee methodology report at their Tuesday meeting from Bill Ross III, of planning consultant firm Ross and Associates.

Commissioner Tim Lassetter said he thinks things are moving in the right direction, but he's not so sure he agrees with some of the traffic counts.

Lassetter has worked for a drugstore company for more than 28 years. He said he can't understand how a gas station has to pay a transportation impact fee seven times greater than that of a drugstore.

Lassetter said the main reason it doesn't make any sense is that he or his family "would make a special trip to the drugstore to get medication, but we generally would stop by a convenience store and get gas" on the way home or to some other destination.

"I just don't see how the impact of a store, and gas pumps, versus not only the pharmacy but a couple of other examples, would be so much greater," Lassetter said. "For the life of me, I can't get my arms around that."

Under the current impact fee program, a convenience store with gas pumps has to pay \$45,168 per 1,000 square feet. A drugstore is charged \$6,371 per 1,000 square feet, and a shopping center is only charged \$2,481 per 1,000 square feet.

The changes Ross is proposing would reduce those fees to \$25,550 for a gas station, \$4,100 for a drugstore, and \$1,750 for a shopping center.

Ross said the revised methodology takes several things into account. One is the deletion of four proposed road projects, totaling approximately \$25,882,000 in impact-fee eligible costs. It also takes into account the "net present value" of projects, updated tax digest calculations, and credits for other taxes paid.

The draft methodology has six projects being paid for with impact fees. The fees are only calculated to pay half the cost of the projects.

The projects are: Widening of Ga. Hwy. 16 from Interstate 85 to U.S. 29, widening of McIntosh Trail from Ga. Hwy. 54 to the proposed Vernon Hunter Parkway, new interstate interchanges at Poplar Road and an

extension of Amlajack Boulevard, four-laning Poplar Road from the Bypass to Ga. Hwy. 16, and four-laning Ga. Hwy. 154 from Ga. Hwy. 34 to U.S. 29.

Impact fees for road projects are based on trip generation numbers, which is a methodology that has held up in court, Ross said. The numbers, taken from the Manual for Trip Generation of the Institute of traffic engineers, "give us real world data that satisfies a judge," Ross said.

But there's no reason the county can't do its own traffic studies, "other than time and money."

Whether someone is stopping somewhere on the way to somewhere else or making a special trip is already included in the calculations, Ross said.

For a gas station, it is assumed that 60 percent of the trips are from someone already using the road, and 40 percent are special trips to the gas station itself. For a drugstore, it's 49 percent special trips, Ross said.

Lassetter asked if there was a way to cap the maximum charge for some land uses.

"Unfortunately, the Development Impact Fee Act is very deep," Ross said. "There are not simple yes-and-no answers."

The county would have to justify treating certain land uses differently, he said. "All through the law, the word 'fair' appears. Over and over and over again."

The traffic numbers are based on averages. Anyone who feels their proposed project will generate less traffic can prove it with a traffic study, but there is no way to charge more for uses that generate higher-than-average traffic volume.

Lassetter said he wants to do what he can to "stimulate the economy locally so that people are able to put new stores and new businesses in our county.

"From my perspective, I just don't feel comfortable with some of these numbers. I don't think that it is reasonable or fair for some of these," he said. And the differences in trip generation for different types of land uses, "in my opinion, is not as great as what is shown here."

"If, in order to get this reasonable, we have to do away with impact fees, then that would be the way I feel," Lassetter said.

"We don't know what the real numbers are, if they are different," Ross said. "So we can't say that they are not reasonable. We don't know."

"I think we need to do some local studies," Lassetter said. If the trip generation numbers for drugstores were really accurate, "I would be shocked that we have new drugstores all over the county like we do," he said.

Industrial uses produce the least traffic, according to trip generation numbers.

"How does that relate to congestion, tractor-trailers, employees?" asked Commissioner Randolph Collins.

There was some discussion of delaying action, but the board voted to go ahead and set a public hearing on the draft amendment for Feb. 16. "We can make adjustments, do reviews, whatever, between now and then," said County Administrator Theron Gay.

In other meeting business:

*The board heard from David Albrecht, new deputy warden of the Coweta County Prison.

*The board voted down a request to approve additional changes to the site plan for the northeast corner of the Fischer Crossings development.

*The board approved a conditional use permit and variances for recreation facilities at Crossroads Church.

*The board approved a refund of impact fees for lots in The Ridge at Dogwood Lane subdivision. The lots are not currently being developed.

*The board voted to cancel the public hearing scheduled for Feb. 11.

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