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Council rejects impact fee discounts for developers

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer
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Developers will no longer continue to get discounts on the fees that pay for growth, ending a two-month County Council debate on whether to buttress the flagging construction industry by subsidizing the cost of development.

The council Monday night voted 4-3 against a scaled-down proposal to slow a scheduled increase to impact fees in 2011, after two of the plan's sponsors said they could no longer support it.

After a public outcry, the council had previously backed away from a more sweeping proposal to roll back the fees to a level that captures less than 22 percent of the cost of building roads, schools and other infrastructure to accommodate growth.

"I'm going to vote with my constituents tonight," Councilwoman Tricia Johnson, R-Davidsonville, said as she changed course and voted down the proposal she'd helped shepherd to the council in March.

Johnson said she received an abundance of e-mails from voters urging her to oppose the plan and disagreeing with the premise that it would help create jobs.

Councilman Charles W. Ferrar, D-Edgewater, also reversed his position on the bill he helped introduce, but cautioned opponents who say taxpayers shouldn't subsidize development.

"Everybody who owns a home in this county is being subsidized by someone else," Ferrar said. "Remember, you are a net user (of government services). We all are."

Councilman Ed Middlebrooks, R-Severn, and the bill's other two sponsors, Councilmen Ron Dillon, R-

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Pasadena, and Daryl Jones, D-Severn, voted for the plan to more gradually hike the fees to levels that recapture about 80 percent of the cost of growth.

The three represent north county, an area Dillon said includes a lot of small construction businesses that need as much help as they can to recover from the recession.

The proposal to delay those hikes drew vehement opposition from dozens of residents, many of whom spent much of 2008 convincing the council to raise the impact fees.

"At what point does a compromise become a giveaway? The citizens of the county deserve better," said Chris Trumbauer, riverkeeper for the West and Rhode rivers. "We need slow and responsible growth in this county, not reckless growth that doesn't pay for itself. ... We need to do a better job of protecting our natural resources, and that starts with making development pay its fair share."

County Executive John R. Leopold and his staff also argued against the plan.

"I want to commend the County Council majority that opposed this ill-advised and ill-timed legislation that would have unfairly benefited builders and developers at the expense of taxpayers," Leopold said in a statement released last night.

TIF reapproved

The council also approved, for a second time, a controversial tax financing district that would help the Village at Waugh Chapel South in Gambrills get off the ground.




The tax-increment financing district, known as a TIF, would let the developer, Greenberg Gibbons, have lower tax bills in order to help pay for the project's infrastructure.

The county has about a half-dozen similar districts in the county, and approved this one a few months ago. But there was a snafu in the way the bill was advertised, and the council had to take it up again last night. It passed unanimously.

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