

# THE DURANGO HERALD

## County hits brakes on impact fees

**Business owner: Levies could kill plans in Ignacio**

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### In other action

La Plata County commissioners on Tuesday approved a permit for a new cell-phone tower in Redmesa. Public-safety officials in the area have been pressing for the tower because of instances when emergency calls have been dropped or routed to New Mexico. In March, firefighters were delayed responding to a house fire in Breen because a dispatcher in New Mexico received the 911 call and relayed erroneous information to local authorities.

Commissioners also received a report on gas and oil activity in the county during the first quarter of the year.

The numbers show gas prices and

La Plata County commissioners on Tuesday delayed a vote on new road-impact fees after Commissioner Joelle Riddle expressed reservations.

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- Joelle Riddle, La Plata County commissioner

Commissioners will gather in a closed meeting with the county attorney today, and then the proposal is scheduled to come back before them again for a vote Tuesday.

The proposed fee, which would apply only to new development, has been roundly criticized by many builders and economic-development advocates who fear it will dampen new building and deter potential start-ups.

Proponents argue it shifts the burden of paying for road improvements off taxpayers and onto developers.

Riddle, who has expressed support for the fee in the past, said she wanted more time to make up her mind because of new concerns she had about the county's planning process.

"I have heard that there is a great deal of money and time required to navigate an uncertain process. I also know that we have embarked upon a new Land Use Code process that involves clear and measured steps including a comprehensive plan as a start," Riddle said, reading from a prepared statement at the beginning of the meeting.

She called for the review of several specific projects that have been dealt with by the county's planning department, including Little Fishes excavation project, the proposed Airport Business Park and the five-year update to Durango Mountain Resort's master plan.

"I have heard over a few years that there is feedback out there from those that have been through the process but are either frustrated or worried that the feedback could be looked at as complaining and thus possibly affect a future development plan and eventual decision," she said.

Under the current proposal, the fee would range from \$3,954 to \$5,110 for single-family detached houses when fully implemented.

A restaurant developer would pay \$12,672 per 1,000 square feet of floor area, and office developers would pay \$6,634 per 1,000 square feet of space.

Phase-in periods of three to five years at different rates have been discussed.

A letter received by commissioners Monday from DMR questioned the timing of the fee proposal.

"This is certainly the wrong time to impose a significant new burden on the local economy. We suggest that the commissioners consider the fiscal impact of this proposed fee to ascertain what the potential range of revenues may be and what the potential negative impacts could be to the county's economic development may be," the letter states.

Public Works Director Jim Davis said that even imposing the fee as proposed wouldn't cover the entire cost of road impacts caused by new development as estimated by a 2007 study.

"Existing residents would still subsidize some of the road impacts," he said.

During the meeting, commissioners also took testimony from members of the public, including Ezra Lee, owner of Crossfire, a well service and hauling company.

Lee said the amount he would have to pay to expand his growing Ignacio business under the current fee proposal would be "a deal breaker."

"I don't know if we're going to be able to continue to expand our business in La Plata County," he said.

County staff has said the proposed fee schedule closely follows that adopted by the city in August 2008. The purpose of that is so developers don't flock to unincorporated areas to avoid paying higher city fees.

The city's fee schedule was based on a study commissioned by the city and county. Consulting firm Duncan Associates conducted the study, which was completed in 2007.

The question of how the county will continue to maintain roads and provide all the other services it does as revenues decline is a pressing one.

County revenue is expected to decline by about \$11 million next year because of decreased tax revenue from gas operators.

"We're contracting. I don't know where the money is going to come from," Riddle said.

Revenue from gas production has helped keep the county's property taxes among the lowest in the state.

Commissioner Kellie Hotter, who opposes the impact fee in its current form, said raising taxes or cutting services are tough decisions looming in the county's future.

"I think that's a conversation we need to have," she said.

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