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County will take another look at impact fees

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BARTOW — In about five weeks, the Polk County Commission will decide what to do about impact fees.

On Wednesday, county commissioners told County Attorney Michael Craig and Assistant County Attorney Linda McKinley that they want to see options on extending the moratorium or either reinstating impact fees at 25 percent of their original value or 50 percent of their value.

Craig will return to the board with options for discussion on Dec. 1.

McKinley told commissioners that whatever they decide, they must set up a hearing before Feb. 1, 2011, and allow at least 90 days in order to give public notice of the hearing.

Recently, commercial development representatives have asked the commission about impact fee relief in order to better facilitate new development in Polk County.

On Oct. 6, Craig told the board he would come back to the county commission on Oct. 20 with some proposals for how the county could extend the moratorium and/or work with developers to help them take advantage of the lower fees.

On Wednesday, he and McKinley sought direction on what changes to draft to the ordinance.

The moratorium took effect on July 1. Since then, commissioners have tried to determine how or if the impact fee ban is drawing in more commercial development, and hopefully more jobs.

To get a better understanding of the situation, county commissioners heard from Thomas Deardorff, director of the Growth Management Department.

Deardorff said that in the third quarter of the year — July, August and September — his office saw 35 pre-application meetings.

Since the moratorium started July 1, he looked at those meetings from August and September to get a feel for which developers were attracted by the lower fees.

It takes about two weeks, he said, to schedule a pre-application meeting, even if developers had known about the moratorium on the first day.

Of 28 pre-application meetings from August and September, Deardorff counted three residential meetings, 14 non-residential meetings, and 11 questions about amendments to the comprehensive land use map.

Of the 14 non-residential projects, there were proposals for 10,000 square feet of retail space on U.S. 92 in Auburndale, an 1,800-square-foot tackle shop at Camp Mack in Lake Wales, a Krystal Hamburgers restaurant on Cypress Gardens Blvd. in Winter Haven, an ice cream shop in the Four corners area, a Camp for teenagers,



redevelopment of a 70,000-square-foot shopping center, a convenience store conversion into a drive-through restaurant on Rifle Range Road, and several accessory structures to improve auto repair businesses.

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Deardorff said it takes three to four months for a developer to get a small land use amendment approved; nine months for a large one.

Commissioner Randy Wilkinson asked about any increases in building homes, stating he had seen more homes being built. Interim County Manager Jim Freeman said he had not seen any increased building, and that permits didn't show any increases since the moratorium.

Deardorff said the three meetings on residential projects concerned two landowners asking about their rights and another replatting an existing development.

Wilkinson also remarked that the Krystal Hamburgers site, which had asked about relief on \$70,000 in impact fees on Oct. 6, was well positioned between the future Legoland Florida and Landings projects.

He suspects that if Krystal can't build there, someone will for the location.

Chuck Hunt of Hunt Construction of Central Florida Inc. said he is concerned about what will happen when the economy and housing construction markets return.

Right now, no one is building because there is a glut of housing on the market, and builders can't compete with foreclosed homes with government purchase incentives.

He said builders will need another six months of impact fee relief after that to cope with the sudden increase in materials costs, which will skyrocket with the new demand, Hunt said.

Commissioner Edwin Smith appreciated Hunt making the distinction that no one is building speculation housing.

'People have a fear of hundreds of subdivisions,' Smith said. 'No one's going to build spec homes.'

The county is trying to promote jobs by spurring commercial growth, he said.

Commissioner Jean Reed said she would also like to see the county adopt incentives to build 'core communities' by filling in and revitalizing urban and established residential areas where infrastructure already exists.

She also said dropping impact fees would ensure the county got commercial development, but not necessarily the best jobs. She said growth should pay at least part of its impact.

Wilkinson did make a motion Wednesday to reinstate impact fees at the end of the moratorium at 50 percent of the original rate. Reed seconded and supported his motion, but other commissioners voted against it.

Wilkinson said the county is 'using a sledgehammer when we should be using a scalpel.'

The situation as it stands, he said, promotes urban sprawl.

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