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Wednesday, Apr 8, 2009

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Posted on Wed, Apr. 08, 2009

## County to cut road impact fees 50 percent

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MANATEE — Bending to the pleas of local developers, the Manatee County Commission moved forward to trim road impact fees 50 percent for two years in hopes of stimulating the construction economy.

After weeks of discussion and lobbying, and following in the footsteps of the Manatee County School Board and the Bradenton City Council, the issue of suspending the fees charged to builders to help pay for growth reached a climax at the county commission level Tuesday.

The board asked the county attorney's office to prepare a resolution to accomplish the impact fee waiver.

County Administrator Ed Hunzeker presented figures showing a 50 percent suspension would cost the county about \$9 million over the two years.

Hunzeker suggested several road projects that can be deferred because of the reduced revenue, including the Moccasin Wallow widening and the 44th Avenue East extension.

Also funding for advance land acquisition for roads would be delayed.

Commissioner Ron Getman, who made the motion to move forward, had to amend his motion several times to reach a consensus with his fellow board members.

"We need to be prudent," Getman said. "I know the developers want to do away with all the impact fees, but a lot of citizens say different."

Commissioner Donna Hayes pushed for 100 percent suspension for two years of all impact fees, including the ones for future parks, public safety and utilities.

"The only thing we know for certain is we are in a bad economy right now and construction needs help," Hayes said. "I don't see any life-threatening issues by waiving impact fees."

After several back and forth discussions, the commissioners agreed 6-0 on the 50 percent and two-year formula, with Commissioner Joe McClash absent.

Along with the school board's proposed suspension of all school impact fees, which the county commission has to approve, the effective reduction in fees will be between 50-75 percent, according to Hunzeker.

Before the commissioners took the vote, several people spoke against the suspension of impact fees.

Marilyn Stasia said money buys quality of life and she was "not in favor of putting the cost of growth on the back of

those already here.”

Stasia said if the commissioners reduce the impact fees, they will have to raise taxes to pay for new roads.

Attorney Ernest Marshall, who is the president of the Federation of Manatee County Community Associations, said suspension of impact fees is politically popular but fiscally unwise.

“Suspension of impact fees will not stimulate the economy,” Marshall said, listing several economic experts to back up his claim.

“If you shut down impact fees, the developers will not suffer,” he said, “but the residents will and you will have to come to us for taxes.”

Hugh McGuire, spokesman for the Manatee County Economic Stimulus Working Group, an organization of local developers and builders, introduced Brian Martin, an associate of Orlando economist Henry Fishkind.

Martin presented slides with figures of the unemployment rate in Manatee County.

“There is a relationship with impact fees and the level of construction,” he said.

“It can stimulate the economy.”

In the end, the commissioners bent toward that conclusion and approved the suspension.

In other action Tuesday, the commissioners decided to forego the property owners’ assessment for dredging the Warner’s East and West bayous canals.

They also agreed to pay to qualified property owners along the Coral Shores canals \$330 to offset the cost of dredging.

And finally, the board decided not to participate in future canal dredging projects, unless certain property owner criteria is met.

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