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Tuesday, May 25, 2010

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## County votes to lower transportation impact fees to zero

Submitted by Robby Douglas on Tue, 05/25/2010 - 7:56pm.

The Citrus County Commission today voted to lower transportation impact fees to zero percent.

The vote was 3-to-2, with commission chairman Gary Bartell and Dennis Damato holding out to keep the reduction of fees from sinking to zero.

To clarify, all commissioners were in favor of lowering impact fees, and only differed in the amount those fees should be lowered.

Commissioner Bartell said 50 percent was a fair and equitable amount, while Commissioner Damato said fees represented value - and were not worth zero. Damato's comments drew loud shouts of protest from those builders and developers attending the commission meeting.

Development services director Kevin Smith was asked by the commission at the last regular meeting of the board to come up with scenarios of the effect of transportation impact-fee reduction on the county and those living and doing business here. Smith had prepared impact-fee reduction scenarios for the commissioners, ranging from 35 to 80 percent.

During discussion, Commissioner Winn Webb was the first commissioner to remark that cutting fees merely by an additional 35 percent was sending the wrong message, and that the county really wasn't competing for business on the same level as those other counties.

- "If the amount (cut) is not equal to or less than surrounding counties," Webb said, "we're fooling ourselves." Commissioner John Thrumston agreed, and noted that not cutting fees significantly would just amount to "smoke and mirrors." Thrumston also said that "impact fees must be lowered to a level where it's really going to make a difference."

Commissioner Joe Meek told commissioners that the county wanted an incentive for potential builders and businesses to build in Citrus County and save money "if they act now." The savings would occur within a six-month window, and the "sale" would end on Dec. 31.

A new ordinance should be crafted after a review of all county impact fees by consultant Duncan & Associates, and should be ready by mid-summer, Smith told commissioners.

Commissioner Bartell cautioned commissioners about pinning all their hopes on impact fees, since other counties supplemented their low - or no - impact fees with revenue streams from other sources. "We don't want to give false hope. We must compare apples with apples," Bartell said.

During public discussion, contractor Ray Stephenson suggested the county lower the transportation impact fees to zero, while another businessman recommended lowering them to



Citrus County Commissioner Winn Webb tells fellow commissioners that if the county doesn't cut impact fees to either equal or beat surrounding counties, it was "fooling" itself.

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95 percent. Citrus County Builders Association President Tommy Long said that the county needed what he called a "fire sale" - right now - so builders could get back to work.

Businessman Rocky Hensley told commissioners the county needed to do something significant when it lowered the fees, and added that he didn't care if the commissioners voted 5-0 or not, so long as fees were cut significantly. As it turned out, Hensley got his wish.

In discussion before the vote, the percentages of the cutting of transportation fees favored by commissioners came out thus:

- Meek, Webb and Thrumston: 0
- Damato: Somewhere between 50 and 75
- Bartell: 50

In the final bit of business, commissioners agreed that "customers" who wish to attend the "sale" must have their completed building plans in to the county by Dec. 31, and that permits must be picked up within seven days of being readied by the county.

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- Yes. It doesn't harm them, and contact is closely monitored.
- No. It harms the animals.
- Yes. Manatee deaths happen from things other than contact with humans.
- No. Manatees have survived for centuries. Now we run over them with boats and annoy them with contact.













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