

# Fort Pierce pursues impact fee moratorium; collections mostly unspent

By Laurie K. Blandford, Susan Burgess

FORT PIERCE — Even with a new mayor, city manager and planning director, the city is on track to freeze impact fees for a year to see if it encourages development — or at least doesn't discourage it.

Since the Fort Pierce City Commission reluctantly, but unanimously, agreed in October to former Mayor [Bob Benton](#)'s proposal to test a moratorium, voters elected Linda Hudson as mayor and commissioners hired Robert Bradshaw as city manager, both in November.

Hudson said she won't be a hindrance if commissioners formally vote to impose a moratorium, which could put the financial burden of paying for the effects of new development back on taxpayers.

"I support anything the city can do to jump-start the local economy and encourage business," Hudson said. "Keeping costs affordable and reasonable is the best way to make Fort Pierce businesses and residents prosperous."

Commissioners are expected to vote in January, according to Planning Director David Carlin, who took over after Matt Margotta resigned to take another job in Maryland.

Impacts fees, which are calculated using a formula that factors in rooftops for residential developments and square footage for commercial developments, are meant to offset the impacts of new development on roads, schools, parks, stormwater drainage, solid waste disposal and government buildings.

Almost all of the \$510,000 the city has collected from developers and individuals since it started impact fees in 2009 remains unspent, although more than two-thirds of it has been allocated for proposed projects.

The city paid \$64,566 in impact fees to renovate the new Police Athletic League Park on South 21st Street and has allocated \$295,434 for seven pending projects, leaving about \$150,000 unbudgeted to serve as a cushion.

A \$20,448 proposed project to install bike racks, lockers and solar-powered repair stations downtown is under way but incomplete.

Required matching grants, for which the city has not yet applied, are holding up two projects. One is a \$40,000 cultural "trail" consisting of kiosks and signs connecting historical attractions. The other is a \$99,000 fishing pier off Melody Lane. The city can't apply for a Florida Inland Navigation District matching grant until the state and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issues permits for the pier project, which could take a year or more, Margotta said before leaving the city.

The remaining three projects total about \$136,000. They include sidewalk designs for 31st Street from Okeechobee Road to Tennessee Avenue, from 21st Street at Havana Avenue, and a sidewalk design and pedestrian bridge over a Garden Avenue canal. The Florida Department of Transportation will pay for the combined \$1 million in construction costs, according to Assistant City Engineer Tracy Telle.

Moratorium critics say it will leave taxpayers paying for development. Increasing sales, gasoline and tourism taxes are ways to recoup the lost revenue, Margotta wrote to commissioners in October.

Critics also cite studies that say there's no proof that suspending impact fees makes a difference, which is why Commissioners Tom Perona, Reggie Sessions and Eddie Becht said they were reluctant in their approval of the concept.

"There's only so much we can do about the economy," Perona said. "It does come down to whether you are seen as being business-friendly or not. But I also have to be a good steward of the people's money. We can see for ourselves whether it's worth it, and if not, pull the plug on it."