

# LARGO FAVORS MORE BREAKS FOR DEVELOPERS OVER PARK IMPACT FEES

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**LARGO** — The idea behind the city's parkland impact fee is this: Developers should pay Largo money to provide parks for the residents who will be living in their new apartment complexes, condos and subdivisions.

But for the past two years, Largo has had a moratorium on its parkland impact fee in the interest of spurring development.

Next month, the city's elected officials will be asked to extend the moratorium for another two years. Once again, this would be a move to foster development. The market for new multifamily housing appears to be heating up, and Largo hopes to woo apartment developers.

City commissioners are signaling that they're in favor of waiving the fee for two more years. Make no mistake, they're all for jobs and growth.

Parks advocates are crying foul.

"We understand the desire to attract business development to the city of Largo, and we understand the attraction of fee elimination or reduction to accomplish that. But we also believe that development in Largo needs to be balanced with green space," said Pat Edmond, president of the Friends of Largo Nature Parks.

Officials can cite several reasons why waiving the fee is no big deal. However, they also acknowledge an awkward reality.

Through annexations, Largo has been steadily expanding its boundaries east of U.S. 19. Commissioners are well aware that the city hasn't been able to follow through on promises to expand parkland in eastern Largo.

Mayor Pat Gerard is receptive to the idea of another temporary moratorium, but she wouldn't want to cancel the parks impact fee for good.

"As time goes on, it's going to get more and more difficult to find pieces of land," the mayor said at a commission meeting held last week. "We've already made a commitment to the east side that we need to have more parkland out there."

"The real need for parks is east," Vice Mayor Woody Brown added.

It's true that the last park that Largo created was on the east side. Seven years ago, the city spent nearly \$900,000 to create 11-acre Datsko Park at the eastern end of Whitney Road. Nearly half the land was donated.

Earlier this year, the city tried to buy 1.4 acres on Roosevelt Boulevard east of U.S. 19 for a small park and trailhead for the Progress Energy Trail. Commissioners voted to spend \$349,000 on the

property, which is owned by the Walker Ford vehicle dealership. But the city backed out of the deal because of a power company easement that restricts the use of the land.

Joan Byrne, Largo's recreation, parks and arts director, said that one goal of Largo's strategic plan is to purchase a 20-acre parcel east of U.S. 19 for park development.

"That costs money," she said.

All of this is going on at the same time that bulldozers have started clearing land for a 342-unit apartment complex in Largo east of U.S. 19.

Still, officials are inclined to keep skipping the parks impact fee for the following reasons:

- Largo has nearly \$2.2 million in impact fees sitting in the bank, available to buy parkland.
- A number of apartment developers are asking the city to waive the fee.
- Largo already has plenty of parkland compared with neighboring cities. It currently has about 8.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 people, according to city estimates.
- The city can barely afford to properly maintain the parkland it has now.

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