Road fee study nixed

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At a workshop on Tuesday, Assistant County Administrator Mounir Bouyounes made one of his periodic appearances before the County Commission seeking to boost the stagnant revenue sources that sustain the county's road network.

In years past, for example, Bouyounes, who also serves as the county's chief engineer, has discussed a countywide assessment to raise revenue for paving, as well as a localized version within the most problematic subdivisions whose poor streets siphon off a disproportionate share of the money.

Tuesday's offering was an up-and-coming infrastructure wrinkle known as mobility fees.

Mobility fees emerged as part of a growth management strategy in Florida in 2009, when the Legislature abolished a mandate for local governments to use concurrency, or the principle, first enacted in 1985, that new development should not go forward until the appropriate infrastructure was in place to support it.

Bouyounes, joined by Greg Slay, executive director of the Ocala-Marion County Transportation Planning Organization, asked the board for up to $100,000 to study whether mobility fees would work in Marion County.

Mobility fees, however, couldn't get any traction with the board.

The idea of a deeper analysis died when a majority of the County Commission — Chairman Carl Zalak and commissioners Earl Arnett and David Moore — expressed opposition to funding the study.

Zalak, a staunch champion of the county's suspension of impact fees, the mechanism by which developers helped fund new roads under the concurrency system, said he didn't want to spend money looking at essentially the same fees by another name.

The county collected impact fees for 20 years before ending the practice in January 2010.

From 1990 to 2010, according to a county report, the fund raised $180 million for road projects.

Mobility fees escalate as developers' projects move further away from urbanized areas.

Slay explained on Tuesday that mobility fees differed from impact fees because the money could fund other modes of transportation.

Rather than simply adding new traffic lanes, the revenue could support mass transit, bicycle routes or pedestrian walkways, Slay said.

Slay suggested that imposing mobility fees could also alleviate traffic by discouraging sprawl in outlying areas.

As state officials wrote in a December 2009 report to lawmakers about mobility fees, "Denser, mixed-use development will pay less than lower density, single-use developments further from urban centers."

Thus, the report noted, "Compact, mixed-use development is dependent on alternatives to the single-occupancy vehicle. The flexibility to spend mobility fees on transportation improvement priorities, coupled with coordinated land-use and transportation strategies, offers greater potential for improved mobility, reduced congestion and more efficient movement of people and goods."

Alachua and Pasco counties both have adopted mobility fees, while they are under consideration in Hillsborough and Nassau counties.

Bouyounes and Slay pointed out some of the challenges the county's current system faces.

Marion County's road money comes primarily from fuel taxes, since the county quit collecting impact fees. Gas taxes, however, primarily pay for repaving and maintaining roads and not building new ones.

The county, meanwhile, has maxed out on the local gas taxes it can charge, and earlier this year began taking in all the revenue after the cities within Marion agreed to give their share of gas-tax dollars to the County Commission.

And although the state's gas taxes rise along with inflation, the federal gas tax has remained about 18 cents a gallon since 1992, Slay added.

Bouyounes noted the board's move to borrow $50 million for roads in 2009 has helped complete many major projects, with others in the works. And the county has landed about $30 million in state and federal grants in recent years, he said.

Despite that, Bouyounes appeared concerned about where fresh road money would come from. As of August, when the commission extended the impact fee suspension through the end of 2014, the county had left $16 million in impact fee revenue on the table.

According to a county report, the impact fee fund still retains $7.4 million, but it is projected to run out by 2016.

Moreover, the county would owe developers $12.3 million in credits that were awarded for their share in a handful of projects that were approved years ago.

"Without impact fees, we don't have a funding source in place for those type of projects that can be done to provide the capacity so this county can continue to grow," he told the commission. "A dedicated funding source is needed to support future growth."

Slay mentioned revitalizing the property tax that Marion County had assessed for roads until stopping in the mid-1990s. The tax still appears on tax bills, but the tax rate is set at zero.

Charging $1 for each $1,000 of taxable value could generate $13 million a year, he noted.

Osceola County, Slay said, levies a property tax on new development that sets aside a portion of the revenue for road projects.

Slay also raised the concept of a sales tax. Yet that came on the same day the board was wrestling with the proposal for a half-cent sales tax to support construction of a 4,000-seat baseball stadium in order to relocate to Ocala a New York Yankees minor league franchise in Tampa.

The commissioners let those pass without comment.

Only commissioners Stan McClain and Kathy Bryant seemed willing to explore the possibility of creating new revenue sources.

McClain supported funding the mobility fee study, as Bouyounes requested, while Bryant argued that the issue was urgent.

"This train is coming down the track, and we're going to have to deal with it," she said. "We need to start looking for alternatives."

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