

Commission votes to keep impact fees unchanged

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PANAMA CITY — The Bay County Commission overrode one commissioner's objections Tuesday and kept all its impact fees at the same level as last year, which is substantially lower than the prescribed amount.

Commissioner Mike Thomas argued the fees are needed as the county continues to grow, especially in the rural northern district and the beach. He said the county should collect the full fire, parks and recreation and library impact fees, levied on new construction.

Since 2008, the county has charged only half the impact fees for those three categories and no road impact fees. Thomas supported charging no road impact fees.

"When we did this [in the past], I agreed with what we did, and I didn't see any change in building permits; if anything, they kept falling," Thomas told the commission.

The fees have funded several parks projects and will continue to do so in the future, Thomas said. The fees are in place to account for new people moving into the area and the impact they will have on the existing facilities, he said.

"I know, at least in my district, it's steadily growing," he said.

Under the county's reduced impact fee schedule, the county has lost out on \$253,405 in fire fees, \$315,958 in parks fees and \$79,219 in library fees in the last five years.

The commission listened to Thomas' concerns and debated the matter, but ultimately voted 4-1 — Thomas was the lone nay — to keep the fees the same, as the county staff recommended. The vote implements the fee levels for two years.

The fees were one of several housekeeping items the board voted on Tuesday, which marked the start of the county's new fiscal year.

Chairman George Gainer vocally supported maintaining the same fees, saying they make the county a hospitable place for development.

"I feel like the message that we're sending by reducing these fees for another two years sends a very positive message out to the public — the community — the county encourages people to build and come to Bay County," Gainer said.

Commissioner Bill Dozier favored the same fee levels and noted park impact fees could be used only for expansion and new facilities.

The county has about \$1.6 million in park impact fees, but more than a half-million of that is slated for the Crooked Creek boat ramp and Steelfield Road gun range projects.

Dozier also spoke out against increasing road impact fees, saying he didn't agree with how they were assessed in the past. He said small facilities, depending on their use, could see fees so high it wasn't feasible to build.

County Manager Ed Smith said the road fees hit small banks and daycare centers particularly hard. He said the road impact fees, similar to park fees, only could be used for increasing "capacity" — such as adding extra lanes — not repairs or paving dirt roads.

"As you know those issues are so expensive that the amount of money raised in the transportation (road) impact fee wouldn't really make a dent on [State] 390 or wherever the fees are collected," Smith said.

Thomas, meanwhile, lobbied hard but to no avail to raise the fire, parks and library fees, noting recent zoning changes in the Sand Hills area show it will grow in the future. He said if there isn't money to build parks and libraries and support fire operations, the future commission would be "in a bind."