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County axes subsidy for residents building homes

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A County Commission discussion Tuesday over proposed changes to Alachua County's impact fee relief program culminated in a narrow decision to eliminate the program at the end of this fiscal year.

The Affordable Housing Impact Fee Relief Program provides funding to help cover the cost of impact fees for eligible applicants. Eligibility is based on income and other factors.

Impact fees are one-time charges for new development meant to help pay for costs related to the infrastructure improvements needed due to growth. The county allocated \$25,000 this year for the program.

Staff recommended changes to the program to address several issues. Employees have questioned whether certain applicants need assistance, including those who submitted applications for second homes or requests for reimbursements and students applying for assistance whose parents are covering the home construction costs.

Proposed changes included excluding full-time students, homes greater than 1,800 square feet and rental housing from assistance, as well as requiring denial of reimbursement requests.

A maximum amount of assistance of \$4,000 per household and the establishment of a formal appeals process for application denials were also suggested, among other alterations.

Tom Webster, housing programs manager for the county, pointed out that one applicant alone received around 30 percent of the program's available funding this year, which is an issue the assistance cap would fix.

Commissioners questioned several of the proposed changes. Commissioners Charles "Chuck" Chestnut IV and Lee Pinkoson were concerned about excluding students because some of them work to pay for their education and don't receive parental assistance with tuition and other expenses.

Commissioner Mike Byerly said he didn't think the county should be funding this program at all. This isn't a poverty relief program, he said.

It gives taxpayer money to people building new homes — money Byerly said he felt could be better used elsewhere, such as in the Community Agency Partnership Program.

Toward the end of the discussion, Chestnut said he no longer saw the need of the program after learning more about the circumstances. If the \$25,000 in funding only helps seven or so families, he said, that's an issue.

Kara Bolton, a member of the county's Affordable Housing Advisory Committee, told the commission she came before them Tuesday as a homeowner and explained her concerns with the staff proposal.

The problem isn't with the applicants, according to Bolton. “The confusion is within the Department of Growth Management,” she said.

Bolton said she didn't like the staff's recommended criteria changes but was supportive of the program overall and its ability to help working families.

“Impact fees are very, very expensive and have continued to rise sharply at the discretion and direction of you,” she told the commission.

Ultimately, commissioners voted 3-2 with Hutchinson and Pinkoson in dissent to eliminate the impact fee relief program at the end of this fiscal year, which concludes Sept. 30.

Growth Management Director Steve Lachnicht said the county has about \$4,000 in remaining funding that it will provide in impact fee assistance before it closes the program out for good.

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