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Push to revisit impact fees falls short

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The new tiered structure will still take effect later this year.

MURDOCK -- After further consideration, Charlotte County's new tiered impact fees will remain in place.

A push to revote on last week's divisive issue fell flat, thwarted Tuesday by the technicalities of the county charter.

It all started at the end of Tuesday's land-use meeting, when Commissioner Bob Starr made an attempt to have last week's vote reconsidered. But Starr was on the losing end of that vote, and the rules dictate that only a commissioner in the majority opinion may bring forward a previous approval for reconsideration.

It was Chairwoman Tricia Duffy who at first seemed interested in changing her mind.

"I do still have some concern about the justification of the road costs," she said. "I'm still not 100 percent convinced that we used the right numbers, I guess you could say."

However, the rules prevented her from doing so -- the chair may not make a motion, only second one presented by another commissioner.

Despite her lack of ability to make a motion, Commissioner Robert Skidmore seconded her intent. But even with the eagerness of Starr and Skidmore to repeal the new tax structure, the only two commissioners who could reconsider the vote -- Adam Cummings and Dick Loftus -- did not waver.

Loftus said the county needs impact fee tax dollars to pay for the infrastructure costs associated with roads and utilities. He said that it was time he and his fellow commissioners "bite the bullet."

"Are we going to get ad valorem (property tax) dollars," Loftus asked, "to pay for these projects? I don't think so."

In last week's vote, Duffy was swayed from the dais to vote in favor of the tiered impact fee structure. The new total impact fee rate for a new home in the urban service area -- that is, where roads and utilities are prevalent -- will be \$4,002, with \$2,188 of that cost covering transportation fees. The fees are roughly triple that for new buildings in remote locations.

The fees are disproportionately high outside of the urban service area by design. County officials hope to encourage smart growth and avoid urban sprawl by incentivizing construction in populated areas. If homes and businesses are spread out, the cost of roads and utilities infrastructure rises dramatically.

After Starr raised the issue Tuesday, Duffy said she had been dwelling on the previous week's vote. She asked if her fellow commissioners would consider at least extending the currently reduced impact fee rate another three months, through the end of 2009.

Members of the Charlotte-DeSoto Building Industry Association requested the reduced impact fees as a way to encourage development, but the lowered taxes failed to produce any results in a significantly depressed housing market.

As for the tiered impact fee structure, members of the association have taken issue with some of the proposed fees. They have asked for more time to work with county staff to find a rate they feel is fair.

In response to Duffy's proposed three-month extension, both Loftus and Cummings said they felt it would only give the local building community more time to find more reasons to oppose the new tiered structure. They see no unfairness in the proposed fees.

"There is no end to this conversation," Cummings said. "There will always be another excuse why we need to revise these numbers."

Though Starr's push fell short, Duffy commended him for his effort.

"I'm sorry Commissioner Starr," she told him. "We talked it over, though. That was good."

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