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## LOCAL NEWS

### Growth conference addresses impact fees, zoning laws by *DANA GREEN - Ravalli Republic*

A conference in Helena last week focused on how Montana counties are being impacted by record growth - and what they can do to address its effects.

The Urban Counties Growth Conference, hosted by the Montana Association of Counties, looked at zoning and other county tools for tackling growth, according to County Commission Chairman Greg Chilcott, who attended the conference.

County representatives mostly used the conference to define the common problems impacting all high-growth municipalities, according to Chilcott.

"We looked at how communities faced with rapid growth are responding," he said.

At the top of the agenda was discussing how counties can comply with Senate Bill 185, Chilcott said.

The bill, sponsored by Jeff Mangan, D-Great Falls, opened the door for counties and other municipalities to assess all types of impact fees, including school fees, to fund necessary capital improvements.

Impact fees on development, which have been established in a handful of high-growth counties, had been previously challenged in the courts.

Currently, Ravalli County commissioners have requested a study of how impact fees could be used to charge developers for road impacts.

Any fees would have to go through the local public hearing process through a redraft of local subdivision laws, according to Chilcott.

"If we're going to explore impact fees we're going to have to rewrite the (county subdivision) regulations," he said.

Zoning was also high on the conference agenda - with high-density subdivisions, such as the proposed 650-lot Aspen Springs complex in Florence, putting the issue on the front burner.

"We're all looking at whether that's something we'll have to face," Chilcott said. "We're not the only county looking at larger subdivisions."

Conference participants also discussed growth impacts on roads, cluster developments, affordable housing issues, and sign ordinances,

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according to Chilcott.

With ideas from other counties, commissioners will now bring back ideas and hash out plans for implementation down the road.

"It was a lot of brainstorming," he said. "So we could come back and discuss these (issues) when we have a chance to discuss them with our planning boards and other commissioners."

The statewide association will organize another conference for high-growth counties in the fall, Chilcott said.

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