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Impact fee cut incentive bill gains in House

Sponsored by Cape's Aubuchon, proposal would increase counties' housing funds

By *BETTY PARKER*
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TALLAHASSEE — A bill that would reward counties for cutting impact fees passed through its first House committee Thursday.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Gary Aubuchon, R-Cape Coral, would increase funding for affordable housing to counties that lower impact fees.

Florida has about \$243 million in its affordable housing trust fund, dollars obtained by fees on documentary stamps. But Gov. Charlie Crist supports a provision in the bill that provides an additional \$75 million for local governments that lower impact fees by at least 25 percent or have already done so recently.

Impact fees are one-time fees on new construction collected from builders for roads, parks, emergency services and libraries. The impact fees are usually passed on to customers who buy the homes.

One county that would benefit is Charlotte, which already has lowered its fees, Aubuchon said.

Lee County commissioners earlier this month decided not to slash impact fees for roads to help the suffering building industry. Instead, it decided to wait until an impact fee study is finished in late summer or early fall.

While noting Lee County was weighing the value of cutting impact fees, Joan LaGuardia, communications manager for the Lee County Department of Community Development, said the fee reduction might carry unintended consequences.

"We have also pledged to continue our road and capital improvement projects to keep those construction jobs going," LaGuardia said. "If you cut impact fees much further, how does that impact what we've already committed to build to stimulate the economy?"

Cape Coral Mayor Eric Feichthaler said he's not sure the bill would benefit the city.

"Certainly it would benefit the slumping economy and there's some value to that," Feichthaler said. "But it's going to be difficult to sell (the lower impact fees). I just don't see how that benefits the city directly."

Aubuchon said he and the governor supported the incentive not just to provide more money for affordable housing, but as an overall construction stimulus.

That provision won praise from the Florida Homebuilders, but was criticized by the Florida Federation of Mobile Homeowners. Spokesperson Nancy Steward pointed out only homeowners who own the land the home sits on can qualify, which eliminates most park residents.

But Wellington Meffert of the Florida Housing Finance Corp., which administers the trust fund money, and Aubuchon said debate is still ongoing about inclusion of manufactured homes, which may not

always meet the same storm safety codes as standard homes.

The bill has two more committee stops in the House and also must clear the Senate before it can take effect.

Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, said he liked the part about lower impact fees, in part because Collier's impact fees are so high. Hudson, a new House member elected to fill the vacancy created by Rep. Mike Davis' death, said he believes Davis — a champion of affordable housing — would be pleased with the changes made by the bill.

With Florida facing budget cuts, and some lawmakers proposing raids on trust funds, Aubuchon said a fight may be ahead to secure both the trust fund and the extra \$75 million.

“But we haven't really gotten into the budget issues yet,” he said, “and that's where the money questions will be settled.”

— The News-Press staff writer Brian Liberatore contributed to this report.
