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Report: Lake can't rely on impact fees for roads

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TAVARES

Lake County can't rely on impact fees to build new roads, a task force concluded in a report that offered 10 other possible funding options, including higher taxes.

The 16-page report will get a thorough review by the Lake County Commission early next year, board Chairman Welton Cadwell promised.

The seven-member task force was created by commissioners after the board rejected a dramatic hike in road-impact fees in August 2007 that would have added more than \$11,000 to the cost of a new home.

In the report's introduction, the task force's chairman, H. Bennett Walling of Leesburg, recommended

that commissioners impose a temporary moratorium on existing impact fees, hopeful that such relief "may promote some new development and might soften the present economic woes in Lake County."

The county tacks on \$2,198 to the cost of a new home for roads.

The task force, composed of private citizens with business backgrounds, viewed roads as vital to the county's future as water, sewers and schools, outweighing many other government services in importance.

They also found the county's impact-fee funding "insufficient," especially in light of the economic downturn.

They met a dozen times during the past year, weighing such issues as school concurrency and transportation capacity while the national, state and local economies fell into crisis.

They learned that Lake was the only Central Florida county to fund roads solely through transportation-impact fees. Neighboring counties kick in revenue from gas, sales and property taxes.

The group advised government leaders to "refocus" their priorities on roads and transportation, making special note that "no Lake County property tax revenue is formally committed" to roads.

Among its conclusions:

*The task force recommended that commissioners "act now . . . With each passing month and year, the problem worsens and opportunity is lost."

*Though task-force members declared that they were "not supportive of tax increases," the group included options to boost property, sales and gas taxes to pay for roads.

*They also suggested the county more closely scrutinize its road projects, engaging outside auditors if necessary to analyze efficiency.

*The task force also recommended that the county form a budget-assessment board to provide "public oversight."

Additional information about the task force and its work can be viewed at the county's Web site, lake county.fl.gov, by searching for the key words transportation alternative funding.

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