



» [Email the Editor](#) » [Email Article](#)

[The Jones County News](#) / STPNS

February 01, 2007

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

## Commissioners put impact fees on hold

Input from developers, development authority raises concerns

*By Debbie Lurie-Smith  
 for The Jones County News*

GRAY, Georgia (STPNS) -- Jones [County commissioners](#) opted to give Development Authority members more time to study the effect of impact fees on industry at the conclusion of last week's workshop.

Experts for and against impact fees were in attendance at the January 25 meeting as well as developers and citizens, and commission members listened to all sides. The decision before the commissioners is the hiring of a consulting agency, namely Ross Associates, to study the need for the impact fees in Jones County.

By definition, a development impact fee is a fee charged to cover a new development's impact on infrastructure.

Commissioners set aside \$50,000 in this year's [budget](#) for the hiring of a consultant to study the fees after increasing [property taxes](#) nearly two mills.

The panel heard a presentation from Principal Planner Bill Ross III and Bill Ross Jr. in October and appeared ready to [hire](#) their firm November 21, but several developers came to the workshop and asked to be heard before a commitment was made.

The [developers](#) spoke to commissioners again January 16, and last week's workshop was planned as time for the decision.

### Cons of fees

Columbus [attorney](#) Deron Hicks was hired by local developers to speak to board members at last week's meeting. Hicks pointed out that impact fees can only be used for specific reasons and have to be paid proportionately.

"The money cannot be used to build [new schools](#), and there is a time limit on when the funds have to be spent," the attorney explained. "Our big concern is that the county has not done its [due diligence](#) in researching impact fees. That's important now because of the proposed industrial park."

Hicks said attracting industry is a [competitive environment](#), and the effect of impact fees in

that process has not been addressed.

“When you hire a consultant, you are headed down the path to adopt impact fees. We suggest a true study committee be set up before you hire a consultant in order to understand the true impact,” Hicks said.

The attorney said it is a misconception that impact fees kill residential growth.

“Residents will come, but how will this effect industry?”

#### Authority stance

Development Authority Chairman Greg Mullis agreed that the issue is one he has not spent a great deal of time studying, but said he has access to the Georgia [network](#) of economic developers.

“We started talking to our peers and didn’t get a lot of good information. We found that many counties in our situation have started exploring impact fees,” Mullis said. “This is somewhat uncharted waters.”

The chairman said he looked online and found information to support implementing impact fees.

“Having a county that can afford infrastructure, fire protection, and water and sewer is attractive to us,” Mullis said. “But we have to protect the ability of the development authority to offer incentives to bring industry here.”

Mullis said the county can wave fees for industry in the case of extraordinary economic development, employment growth, or affordable housing. The provision for impact fees must be included in the county’s comprehensive plan.

Development Authority Executive Director Pam Christopher said she understands why the county is looking into the effect of impact fees.

“We do need a mix of home building and industry, and citizens are crying for industry,” Christopher said. “I have done my due diligence, and the property owners have the tax burden now.”

Christopher said more than one option is available in reducing the fees for industry.

“You can decide to abate taxes for industry, but it won’t be forever,” she explained. “Usually there is a cap of from five to 10 years, and after that we will receive taxes from them. The jobs that are created will more than make up for that. I understand your concerns, but industry is the answer for us to move in the direction we need to.”

Christopher said she and Mullis will continue to research the question, and Commissioner Larry Childs asked how long it will take.

“Give us time to talk to our attorney, maybe a week. We want to talk to our counterparts in Henry, Spaulding, and Effingham counties,” Mullis said, indicating counties that have adopted impact fees.

#### Community input

Susan Green told commissioners that everyone recognizes that the county has a problem.

“We have rapidly escalating property taxes. Low property taxes were an advantage, but we are losing that edge,” Green said. “Now we have the opportunity to explore other funding alternatives. Developers have the opportunity through impact fees to be part of the solution instead of the problem. We don’t want to stop growth; we just want to support it.”

Green said the Georgia Department of Community Affairs defines the intent of impact fees as: to ensure adequate public facilities to support new growth.

Developer Brian Jackson asked the commissioners about their next step.

"Where do we go from here? Are we going to delve into it further and give us time to explore what we've talked about tonight?" Jackson asked. "We want to scrutinize this and make sure we are headed up the right road."

Commissioner David Gault said he would like more information.

"We don't want to jump off the diving board and find out the pool is empty," Gault said.

Consultant speaks

Bill Ross Jr. said Jones is not the first county with questions about impact fees.

"That is the whole purpose of doing a study. Our contract is not a Chinese puzzle. It only authorizes the initial study to look at which of these impact fee categories are right for you," Ross said. "You will be making the decisions; we feed you the information."

The consultant said it is important to gather enough data to advise the county intelligently.

"Impact fees are based on your plan and finding funding sources to help build the facilities you need and have planned for your community," Ross said. "Impact fees should be set so they are not high enough to hurt the market but enough to get the services out there."

Decision delayed

Gault suggested waiting until the Development Authority members are ready with their information.

"I believe we need to explore all sources so no one can come back and say we rushed to do this," he said.

The commissioners agreed by consensus to have another impact fee workshop at 5:30 before their February 8 meeting with the plan of making a decision about the consultant at the meeting.

"We are not trying to push anything down anyone's throat, but we need help and we need advice," Commission Chairman Preston Hawkins stated.

© 2007 [The Jones County News](#) Gray, Georgia. All Rights Reserved. This content, including derivations, may not be stored or distributed in any manner, disseminated, published, broadcast, rewritten or reproduced without express, written consent from [STPNS](#).

[Visit SmallTownPapers.com](#) [Contact STPNS](#) [FAQ](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Copyright](#) [Permissions](#)

Copyright © 2007 SmallTownPapers, Inc. Source content copyrighted by publisher. All rights reserved. Use subject to [License Agreement](#)