

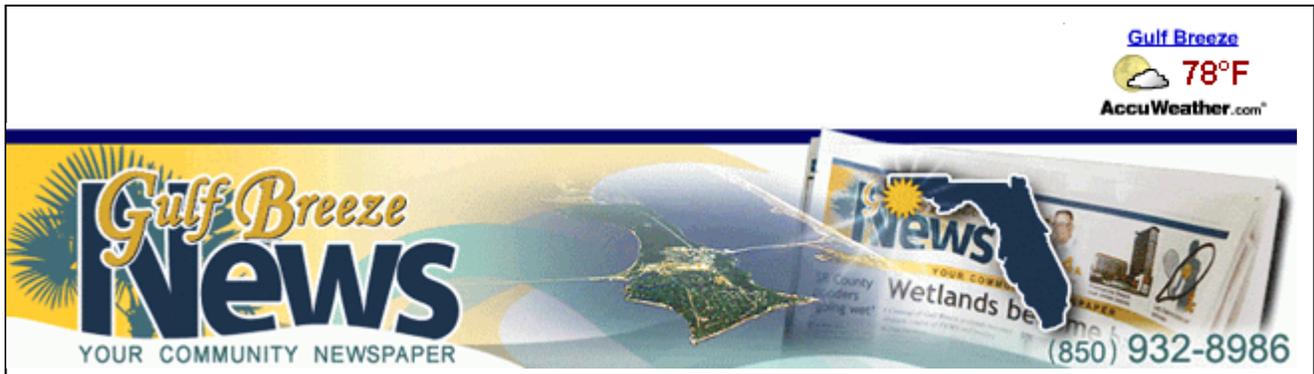
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Leaders fear impact fees deter development

BY PAM BRANNON Gulf Breeze News
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Santa Rosa County Commissioners think water taps and utility impact fees might be stalling economic development in the area.

"I know of one business that we had given incentives to locate in the county, but the water utility impact fee was \$1 million," Commissioner Don Salter said last week. "That business went elsewhere."

So commissioners, gathered in Milton for an impact fee workshop on May 20, directed their staff to arrange meetings with the county's utility companies. Commissioners want utilities to find a way to offer lower utility impact fees to help attract new industry.

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The issue is of special concern now because of supplier businesses' desire to locate within 160 miles of the new fueling tanker project in Mobile, Ala.

A massive new steel mill also is coming to the Mobile area.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," Commissioner Gordon Goodin said. "We need to be competitive to draw those supplier and support industries here. And since we are the governmental agency that can redraw zoning lines, we might have to redraw some lines.

"If we have a utility like Milton Water that is willing to work with us, and have some others that are not, we might need to redraw some lines to make available incentives in areas around Interstate 10. We need an exchange or two off I- 10 for easy access for industries wanting to come here and be a supplier for a Mobile industry.

"And since Milton has already made it known they are willing to partner with us to draw new industry here, I say let's partner."

Jim Young of Milton said he has already been contacted by more than one Fortune 500 company that is looking at Santa Rosa County to locate, but each asked the same question: Is there easy access to I-10?

"The I-10 corridor is where businesses that support the




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tanker project want to locate," Young said. "These are light industry manufacturing businesses, the kind of industry we need in this county. We need to find a way to bring them here."

Commissioners discussed the issue of I-10 access and utility fees during the impact-fee workshop. There is concern on how impact fees affect the economy in all parts of the county, including the South End.

Goodin is also concerned about incentives to use existing vacant buildings, and the county being able to offer low-interest loans to businesses locating here.

"We are competing with Alabama in drawing these new industries and suppliers here, and we better act like we are in competition. Alabama has come up with a low-interest loan package of 2.9 percent interest. If a business asks what incentives we have, and if they can get a low-interest loan like that and we don't have it to offer, they are going north of Mobile - or even west.

"It is my understanding that Louisiana has now also come up with a similar loan package."

Goodin asked that the administrative staff contact Louisiana and Alabama Economic Development organizations to "decide if we can come up with something that can compete with those packages."

Goodin said the vacant existing buildings could be used by some businesses moving here, if impact fees on those businesses and buildings were lessened.

Commissioner Bob Cole said he would also like to review Community Redevelopment Areas around the county.

"I wonder if we should look into these and review them to see if there is still a need for a CRA in these locations."

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL AND PAUL AT THE
SOUTH END OF GULF BREEZE TOWN
COMMUNITIES (LEFT) TO THE SOUTH
END AND 2 BONUS INTO THE SOUTH
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The son of a
former Cuban
actor, Neal
Boortz grew up in
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and moved to
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1988. He is now
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Commission Chairman John Broxson of Gulf Breeze told commissioners that impact-fee revenue is going down in the county since inspections for new building have drastically decreased over the past year.

"In April of 2007, there were 4,339 inspections requested for new construction," Broxson said. "In April of this year, there were only 2,410 inspections requested. We need to find some incentives for new business to locate here, for sure."