

# Avon Park City Council discuss impact fee waiver, fire assessment options

By PAUL CATALA  
Highlands Today



PAUL CATALA/STAFF

Avon Park Administrative Services Director Maria Sutherland accepts an plaque of recognition and thanks from resident and veteran advocate Shirley Johnson for the city's Veterans Day celebrations. "I want to make sure you know we care. We care about what you did," said Johnson, prior to the Avon Park City Council meeting Dec. 9.

**AVON PARK** - With members previously split on possibly extending an impact fee waiver and varying opinions on looking into the best way to setting fire assessment rates, there was more of a consensus on both items Monday night.

At the Avon Park City Council meeting, council members voted unanimously to approve the first reading of a utility impact fee credit of up to \$20,000 for existing vacant buildings and unanimously approved to chose to keep the current system in place for setting fire assessment rates.

Regarding the impact fee waiver, over the past two years council members said the program has been successful in attracting new businesses downtown, including three new restaurants, with two more restaurants in the process of opening. Council members reiterated they want to continue that momentum of economic development and continue discussing the waiver as a way to bring in business owners.

"The citizens have asked me to support (the waiver). I have always been for Avon Park to be more business-friendly," said Councilwoman Brenda Giles.

City Manager Julian Deleon has recommended a five-year extension of the fee waiver even though council can discontinue it as soon as two years, which he said is impractical. He said it's vital to keep momentum, which creates local jobs and services for residents.

"This should only be for existing buildings; we have a lot that needs to be filled up. It's a big benefit to have this in place," said Councilman Garrett Anderson.

The council then evaluated two fire assessment options, opting to keep the current system, reducing tax rates by 23 percent across the board so all residents and commercial businesses have the same benefit. With the system in place, some businesses and organizations such as churches, assisted living facilities and camps pay a high assessment rate and large apartment complexes pay a high rate due to paying a residential rate of \$165 per unit.

Deleon said there is another large tax reduction planned for fiscal year 2014-15.

"Every resident pays \$165, no matter the size of the home," said resident Jim Barnard, who moved to Avon Park nine years ago. I think it's great. Let's lower the fire assessment. Let's make it fair to everybody."

The council also approved Dec. 23 as the official annexation day of the Crystal Lake Golf Club, when another 500 homes and 1,000 more residents will live within the city limits. Deleon said there will be several vacancies on city boards and the annexation will widen the pool of residents to serve on them. As residents are added, the city is maintaining close communications with the HOA leadership and community management.

pcatala@highlandstoday.com

(813) 386-5855