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Commission rejects impact-fee increase

Builders catch a break as the county was widely expected to raise its construction levies. Veterans benefit Red light on signal

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The builders got a break.

In a bit of a surprising move Tuesday, the Marion County Commission narrowly rejected an anticipated increase in impact fees on new construction, saying a fee increase would do more harm than good to a construction industry already rocked by a bum economy.

Despite recommendations to raise the fees from both their own staff and the school district, and a lack of public opposition from the building industry, the commission voted down the increase 3-2.

No one from the public spoke in favor of or against the increase during a public hearing Tuesday.

Commissioner Charlie Stone voiced the majority's concerns. He said it was inappropriate to tack on higher rates with the economy in such poor shape. He suggested instead that the commission should try to reduce fees to spur construction.

Impact fees are a one-time assessment to new housing and commercial development to help cover the costs for fire protection, road construction and education.

County policies allow the board to increase the fees annually.

On a single-family home, for instance, the proposed fees for 2010 would have jumped by \$750 to \$6,849 for transportation, by \$142 to \$4,109 for education and by \$10 to \$297 for fire protection. Commercial fees vary by the size of the project.

Stone's argument won over commissioners Stan McClain and Mike Amsden, who joined him in defeating the planned rate change.

But Commissioner Barbara Fitos countered that the board had agreed a year ago to index the fees annually, and doing so would boost revenues when the economy turned around. "Remaining static," she said, "is going to be more detrimental."

After the meeting, Payton said he sided with Fitos because he, too, believed the board should have followed through on annual increases and because she was correct in arguing for a more long-range outlook.

Some of Marion County's aging veterans won't need Ty Pennington and the "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" crew after all. The Obama administration has come to their aid.

On Tuesday, the County Commission approved passing along \$861,000 in federal grants to build a 16-unit wing onto the Veterans of Foreign Wars Retirement Home in Fort McCoy.

More than 30 residents and staff of the home were on hand Tuesday, many wearing the VFW's familiar blue service cap, for the commission's unanimous vote to award the grant. They applauded when the decision was announced.

The new addition to the 20-year-old facility will house women veterans.

The money also will fund renovations to much of the facility.

Those improvements include making bathrooms in the existing 55 units compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, repairing the common area and dining room by fixing structural damage to the ceiling, installing energy-efficient windows and lighting, and replacing carpeting.

The outside of the building will receive a fresh coat of paint.

Veterans advocates started a push last year to raise the money. They hosted a private fundraiser at the home, and one of them, longtime entertainer Kaye

Stevens, a Summerfield resident who has performed with show business legends including Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra, urged the County Commission to financially assist the retirement home. The board subsequently promised to look for grants.

Stevens also filmed a DVD highlighting deteriorating conditions at the facility. The disc was sent to producers of ABC's "Extreme Makeover."

The bulk of the grant money, about \$469,000, came to Marion County through the \$775 billion federal stimulus program approved earlier this year. The remainder was available through the county's annual Community Development Block Grant from the federal government.

Community Services Department Director Cheryl Amey said the VFW home topped the list of potential projects because it was the most "shovel ready."

The county should receive the funding in September, she said. The project is expected to be completed about a year from now.

Motorists traveling County Road 475 still must stop at Southwest 80th Street, but it won't be because of the new stoplight county officials planned to install there.

County commissioners decided Tuesday to leave in place the stop signs at the intersection after residents in the area complained.

About 10 people who live in the Shady area spoke Tuesday, asking the board to reject the stoplight.

They appeared after county staff recently met with residents to discuss the plan, which the county developed years ago, and what additional right of way was needed.

County Transportation Department Director Mounir Bouyounes explained that the light would help the traffic flow.

"You increase the efficiency of the intersection, you increase the efficiency of the road," he told the board.

Opponents, however, said they did not want that.

They argued a traffic light was unnecessary and might actually decrease safety as drivers would speed up to get through it. They also felt the stoplight actually would give developers a green light to intensify development in the area.

Resident Michelle Shearer, for example, worried about the community being "attacked" by growth-industry interests and pleaded with commissioners to preserve the community.

They encouraged the board to instead look for traffic improvements elsewhere in the county, such as helping build the planned flyover from State Road 200 to Southwest 42nd Street, or to install lights in other high-traffic parts such as the SR 200 corridor.

The board agreed to table the project after Chairman Jim Payton and Commissioner Stan McClain said they frequently travel the road and did not see the need for a light.