

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only.

Copyright © 2013 <http://www.newsherald.com> — All rights reserved.
Restricted use only.

Commission votes to keep impact fees unchanged

By *MATTHEW BEATON* | *The News Herald*

Published: Tuesday, October 1, 2013 at 20:10 PM.

PANAMA CITY — The Bay County Commission overrode one commissioner's objections Tuesday and kept all its impact fees at the same level as last year, which is substantially lower than the prescribed amount.

Commissioner Mike Thomas argued the fees are needed as the county continues to grow, especially in the rural northern district and the beach. He said the county should collect the full fire, parks and recreation and library impact fees, levied on new construction.

Since 2008, the county has charged only half the impact fees for those three categories and no road impact fees. Thomas supported charging no road impact fees.

"When we did this [in the past], I agreed with what we did, and I didn't see any change in building permits; if anything, they kept falling," Thomas told the commission.

The fees have funded several parks projects and will continue to do so in the future, Thomas said. The fees are in place to account for new people moving into the area and the impact they will have on the existing facilities, he said.

"I know, at least in my district, it's steadily growing," he said.

Under the county's reduced impact fee schedule, the county has lost out on \$253,405 in fire fees, \$315,958 in parks fees and \$79,219 in library fees in the last five years.

The commission listened to Thomas' concerns and debated the matter, but ultimately voted 4-1 — Thomas was the lone nay — to keep the fees the same, as the county staff recommended. The vote implements the fee levels for two years.

The fees were one of several housekeeping items the board voted on Tuesday, which marked the start of the county's new fiscal year.

Chairman George Gainer vocally supported maintaining the same fees, saying they make the county a hospitable place for development.

"I feel like the message that we're sending by reducing these fees for another two years sends a very positive message out to the public — the community — the county encourages people to build and come to Bay County," Gainer said.

Commissioner Bill Dozier favored the same fee levels and noted park impact fees could be used only for expansion and new facilities.

The county has about \$1.6 million in park impact fees, but more than a half-million of that is slated for the Crooked Creek boat ramp and Steelfield Road gun range projects.

Dozier also spoke out against increasing road impact fees, saying he didn't agree with how they were assessed in the past. He said small facilities, depending on their use, could see fees so high it wasn't feasible to build.

County Manager Ed Smith said the road fees hit small banks and daycare centers particularly hard. He said the road impact fees, similar to park fees, only could be used for increasing "capacity" — such as adding extra lanes — not repairs or paving dirt roads.

"As you know those issues are so expensive that the amount of money raised in the transportation (road) impact fee wouldn't really make a dent on [State] 390 or wherever the fees are collected," Smith said.

Thomas, meanwhile, lobbied hard but to no avail to raise the fire, parks and library fees, noting recent zoning changes in the Sand Hills area show it will grow in the future. He said if there isn't money to build parks and libraries and support fire operations, the future commission would be "in a bind."

Other action

In other business Tuesday, the commission:

Unanimously approved a \$600,000 initial design phase contract for its alternate water supply project. Phoenix Construction of Lynn Haven has the project contract, which is estimated to carry a \$25 million price tag. The firm has 75 days to execute the work once it gets a notice to proceed.

Awarded a sidewalk construction project along Everitt Avenue to GAC Contractors Inc., of Panama City, which had the low bid of \$875,000.

Passed its fees and fines schedule for the new fiscal year, which includes several fine increases for animal control but also a reduced pet adoption fee, which dropped from \$75 to \$25.

Approved Phoenix Construction as the low bidder for a Transmitter Road repaving project. The low bid was \$1.2 million. The firm will resurface 1.85 miles of the road from around Baldwin Road to U.S. 98. The board also rejected all bids for a neighborhood roads project that would have repaved 6.2 miles around Panama City and Panama City Beach. All of those bids were over budget, so the county will rebid the project.

Approved land use and zoning changes for two large tracts in the Sand Hills area in northern Bay County. The board action changed a 635-acre parcel on Briggs Lane from conservation to residential and a 101-acre parcel on Skunk Valley Road from agriculture to residential.