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TAXPAYERS URGED TO PACK IMPACT FEE MEETING

Diane Rowden wants a full house; the folks who asked for the meeting want a delay.

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: BARBARA BEHRENDT

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Figuring that builders and related interests would pack today's County Commission meeting on possibly cutting impact fees, Commissioner Diane Rowden on Monday fired a pre-emptive strike.

She e-mailed her lengthy list of constituents, telling them that "if you're interested in the future of our county," they need to come and be heard.

Her e-mail went on to say that reducing impact fees "has only one effect: It increases the profits of the builders and developers. In the final analysis, there is no need for their greed."

Rowden said Monday that the purpose of her e-mail was simple: "I think taxpayers should fill up the boardroom."

The builders, real estate agents and other business leaders who requested the impact fee public hearing now are asking for more time to put together their materials. They want to move the hearing to July 29 even though there is no commission meeting scheduled for that day.

In a letter to Commission Chairman Chris Kingsley on Friday, the business liaison committee said it needed the delay because while impact fees were to be discussed today, other economic stimulus issues had been split out by county staff for consideration next week.

"It was clear the commission wanted to hear both issues together to make an informed decision," stated the letter signed by Randy Woodruff, chairman of the business liaison committee.

The committee is composed of the Greater Hernando County Chamber of Commerce, the Hernando Builders Association, the Hernando County Association of Realtors and Hernando Progress.

The committee also noted that it plans to have an expert present research conducted on the issues, and suggested the July 29 date for that discussion.

To hedge their bets, the builders also sent out a call for action to their members late Monday, urging them to come to today's meeting and prove Rowden's e-mail wrong.

The business community pitched the idea of reducing impact fees in order to qualify Hernando County to participate in a one-time-only fund of \$20-million statewide to provide first-time home buyers with down payment assistance. Counties qualify only under certain specific instances such as if they reduce impact fees by 25 percent for at least 18 months.

Rowden said she doesn't believe a delay in the hearing should be granted and that she is ready to hear the information and make a decision today.

In her e-mail to constituents, she states that there would be a "substantial" negative effect on the community if the fees were reduced.

"It sacrifices our future and our infrastructure for builders and developers who have no long-term investment in our county," she wrote. "The only way to offset such a reduction in impact fees is to raise taxes. This puts the burden squarely and solely on Hernando County taxpayers while allowing the builders and developers to walk away."

While Dudley Hampton Jr., president of the Builders Association, said Rowden was free to drum up support for her perspective, he also said he was disappointed by her unwillingness to listen to all the facts before taking her stand. He said the business community simply wants to find a way to stimulate Hernando County's sluggish economy.

"Everybody keeps beating the builders and developers up about this. This is not about the builders. This is about getting our piece of that \$20-million," he said.

The money could help first-time home buyers and it could help by moving some of the glut of already-built and available houses off the inventory. Once that happens, "the free market will take care of our interests," Hampton said of his own building company and other home builders.

Any help to that aspect of the market also helps people in other industries, such as title companies and insurance companies - and these businesses, along with the builders association members, "these people live here," he said.

Hampton said providing jobs for the local residents was the key issue. "I'm just working to keep people working," he said.

Barbara Behrendt can be reached at behrendt@sptimes.com or (352) 848-1434.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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