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# County impact fees to be reduced

## Commission OKs measure by 4-1 vote

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BARTOW - In an attempt to stimulate the local economy, county commissioners voted today to reduce building impact fees.

With the 4-1 vote - Commissioner Jean Reed cast the dissenting vote - the commission approved a recently completed transportation impact fee study, selected a rate reduction schedule based on the study and instituted a 50 percent rate cut across the board for all other impact fees except for education. The changes take effect April 1.

Fees reduced 50 percent include those collected for Emergency Medical Services, correctional facilities, fire, law enforcement, library and parks. These cuts will remain in effect until the commission receives results from studies of those impact fees, at which times they may be increased or decreased.

Reed voted against the cuts because she didn't agree with the 50 percent reduction on fees that will be discussed in April.

"I think it is ridiculous to cut something in half that we are going to revisit," Reed said.

The current impact fee on a single-family home is \$6,247. When the reduction goes into effect, the fee will drop to \$4,663, a 25 percent decrease.

Commercial impact fees vary by land use. For example, office space less than 100,000 square feet currently requires an impact fee of \$10,090. According to the new fee schedule, this would decrease by 50 percent to \$5,051. General industrial construction of 1,000 square feet now pays \$1,455 in impact fees. The new rate will be \$149, a decrease of 90 percent.

"I think we are doing the legal thing, the right thing," said Commissioner Ed Smith.

According to consultant Steve Tindale of the Lakeland-based planning and engineering firm Tindale-Oliver and Associates, the study took into consideration travel demand on road to determine suggested impact fees and compared these to those charged in other areas.

This study, which recommended two options for impact fee schedules, was then sent to the county's Impact Fee Advisory Committee. It was approved by this committee, although support wasn't unanimous, said Chairman Robert Dodd.

Commissioners listened to more than three hours of testimony from staff, home builders, Impact Fee Advisory Committee members and municipal representatives before approving the fee reduction. Many asked for the reduction or temporary moratorium on impact fees to make Polk County more competitive in drawing new businesses to the area - which would generate more tax revenue and jobs - as well as stimulating new construction that provide employment for those in the business industry who lost work when the economy weakened.

"The boom has gone bust," said Ray Ready, of Kelray Homes in Auburndale. "Impact fees are a barrier to entry for growth and competition."

Mark Wilson of the Lakeland Area Chamber of Commerce agreed.

"We support the reduction of impact fees as recommended by the committee," Wilson said. "This will create a fair economic climate with neighboring counties."

Scott Columbe, director of the Polk County Builders Association, told commissioners they are "right on track."

Columbe said it is important to be aware of the fees charged in the Tampa and Orlando areas so Polk County can be competitive in drawing companies to the county.

He also explained that lowering impact fees would not create a glut of homes on the market.

A few people spoke against reducing impact fees, maintaining that reducing them will create a gap between necessary infrastructure and the ability to pay for it when the economy begins to improve.

The transportation impact fee study also provided a new category to include the new CSX Intermodal Logistics Center in Winter Haven, however, this was not approved at Tuesday's meeting. It will be addressed during the April 4 commission meeting.

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