

The News Sun

County moves to suspend impact fees

By ED BALDRIDGE

ed.baldridge@newssun.com

SEBRING -- The county commission voted 4-1 Tuesday morning to move forward on suspending impact fees for residential and commercial building projects for 12 months.

Although the commission put July 1 as the effective date, the county has to give the local municipalities and school board at least 60 days for their input into the matter as per a government inter-local agreement.

Then the ordinance changes have to be notified and at least two readings and public hearings have to take place before it goes into effect.

The overall process could last well into August or September before any ordinance is adopted.

Citing that the current fees were "fair and reasonable," Commission Chairperson Barbara Stewart voted no on the proposed ordinance.

"Everyone wants services, but no one wants to pay for them," Stewart said.

"This is a fairness and reasonableness issue. We are only charging 30 percent of what we could charge. We knew when we voted for this that we didn't have the funds from traditional tax sources to pay for infrastructure growth. I think it is fair and reasonable to keep the rates where they are, and I do not support the current moratorium," Stewart asserted after hearing from several citizens about how the impact fees are starving out the local economy.

"People are hurting out there right now," Commissioner Guy Maxcy said.

"This is about putting food in people's mouths, and I welcome any opportunity to help where I can.

"This is about creating jobs and stimulating the economy. Will this stimulate a lot, I am not sure, but at least it will help," Maxcy said.

The agenda item was proposed to the commissioners after the Impact Committee voted 5-3 to suspend

the fees for 12 months to help stimulate building in the county.

Mike Webb of Arthur Rutenberg Homes told commissioners that the "ridiculous" fees are what is deterring several building projects waiting in the wings.

"I will not pay these impact fees. This is a ridiculous tax that is not necessary. I have a client waiting to build right now, but will not move forward with the current fees. I am looking at building, but I will not pay these fees," Webb said.

Other contractors asserted the same argument about special or custom home requests, despite the current glut of more than 1,000 homes in current real estate inventories.

"That 1,000 does not reflect the short sales, foreclosures, and owner sales, so that inventory is a lot higher," said real estate Broker Chip Boring, who is also a member of the Impact Committee.

Commissioner Jeff Carlson, who proposed the motion, asserted that he was against waiving the impact fees, but wanted to move forward and get input from the school district and municipalities.

"I don't think this is going to stimulate the economy a lot, but I want to hear from the other government agencies involved in this. The school district's portion makes up 50 percent of the residential fees, and I do not want to mandate something without their input," Carlson said.

Highlands County Assistant Superintendent of Business Operations for the school board, and a member of the Impact Committee, Mike Averyt was on hand, but added little to the discussion.

"We have encumbered all but \$250,00 of the \$1.6 million collected so far in fees, but I cannot comment on this without the school board's input. This commission has to make a decision, and then forward that to the school board before any comment can be made," Averyt said.

Averyt also stated that he voted against suspending the fees during the committee meeting.

The next step in the process is for County Attorney Ross McBeth to draft changes to the current ordinance and return to the commission for the first official public hearing and reading at the next meeting scheduled on May 19.

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