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County passes revised impact fees, but some faces aren't smiling

Submitted by Robby Douglas on Tue, 02/22/2011 - 10:31pm.

What started as a discussion on Tuesday surrounding adoption of a revised impact fee ordinance soon grew into a meeting dominated by the Citrus County School District.

The heart of the issue was over the interpretation of the consultant about funding for the school district and what it should be set at.

The consultant had recommended the impact fee for schools be set at 50 percent - where it is currently. The school district, however, interpreted the consultant's recommendation as 100 percent, and that the county commission had misunderstood the recommendation. Even if there were no understanding, school district officials said they felt the schools should be allowed to go to 100 percent in terms of their slice of impact fees, even if that percentage were phased in over time.

Also in the mix was the Citrus County Builders Association, which believed that the 50 percent figure recommended by the consultant was, if nothing else, a compromise.



Citrus County School officials on Tuesday were not happy campers when it came to impact fees for schools as the county commission made decisions about what would be approved.

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After charges leveled at the county commission, school district and builders, calmer heads eventually prevailed and commissioners were able to discuss their views before the final vote was taken. That vote was 5-0 to approve the consultant's impact fee recommendations.

Leading off was Commissioner Rebecca Bays.

"We spend money to educate our children, but if we have no jobs for them to come home to after they go off to school and they never come back, is that a lost investment dollar that you spent to educate your children? I think so." Bays said that having jobs for students when they come home is an investment in education. She said that everything the county does is a business, and there is a cost to everything that is done and that takes money. She said the board come back next year and revisit impact fees for the schools, but that now is not the time. "Fifty percent of something is better than nothing," Bays added.

Commissioner Joe Meek said the revised ordinance is much better than its predecessor. Impact fees, he said, are a matter of economics. Referring to mounting impact fees on new home construction costs, Meek asked, "What is enough?" Meek said that impact fees for schools wasn't being cut - it was keeping the fees at the current rate of 50 percent. "We're talking about maintaining what we have, and I just think it's the wrong time in this economy and marketplace that we're in now to be talking about doubling the (school impact) fee. Maybe in the future, but right now, it's extremely difficult."

Commissioner Winn Webb said that impact fees have "unintended consequences" to the county pocketbook when revenues are diminished because of things like unemployment, increased foreclosed and vacant properties, slow construction, less ad valorem taxes and lower student enrollment in county schools. "Whether we like to admit it or not, impact fees are job killers right now. It's the nature of the beast," Webb said. "And, quite frankly, while I'd love to give the school board 100 percent, I'm going to have to go with the 50 percent also."

Commissioner J.J. Kenney said he realized that schools were facing a struggle when facing a down economy, and said, "We've got to get this economy back on track." Kenney said he would like to revisit the school district's need after the county has dealt with budget shortfalls, and the county may be looking at asking the taxpayers for "more money somewhere."

"I think this is one area where we're going to have to back off just for a little while," Kenney said.

Commissioner Dennis Damato said that while some might have seen the day's interchange as a "battleground" which pitted the county against the school district, he saw it as a "excellent discussion" between the staff, community and commissioners.

Because the majority of the meeting was centered around schools, other impact fee areas were not discussed at all, to include transportation impact fees and six smaller fees.

The updated ordinance provides a number of things. First, the change of use has been eliminated. "This will help small business, including medical," said Commission Chairman Dennis Damato. Second, the ordinance defines "existing development" from "within the last 12 months" to Dec. 9, 1986, a move which gives credit for things that were on a property.

The school impact fee has been eliminated for RV parks, but not for mobile home parks. Also removed from the ordinance was the right-of-way costs from the transportation impact fee calculations.

Fee correlations were removed from the Comprehensive Improvement Plan with the thrust being, "fund needs, not wants."

In addition, transportation impact fees, which are now suspended, will resume at a 50 percent rate as of June 1.

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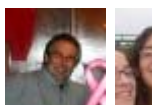
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Schools will be funded at current levels from the impact fee (currently set at 50 percent). Transportation fees will be assessed at 50 percent after June 1.

The ordinance also sets the impact fee update cycle at three years, where it is currently.

In other business, the commission:

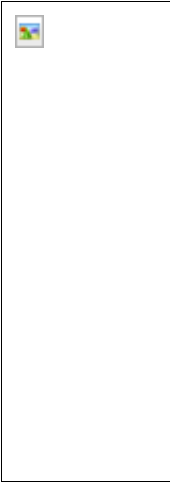
- Approved the formation of a port district at the barge canal to allow the offloading of large ships using barge-based platforms that have come from the Panama Canal area. Citrus County, which established a port authority in 1984, could benefit once it gets the OK from the state Legislature to be designated as a public port.
- Approved the extension of the driver's license office for one year to allow time for the office at Meadowcrest to be readied.
- Set a Special Budget Workshop for the FY 2011/2012 Budget on Tuesday, March 8, 2011, at 9:00 a.m. at the Citrus County Courthouse, 110 North Apopka Avenue, Room 100, Inverness.
- Allotted \$1,200 to the Ozello Civic Association to help eradicate the invasive plant known as the Brazillian Pepper.
- Sign a letter of recommendation to FDS recycling to be presented to Hernando County Commissioner Jeff Stabins for that county's efforts in recycling.
- Heard that Citrus County Fire Services has received a grant that will allow the addition of up to 39 additional firefighters to the county fire force, although that does not include equipment or renovation of facilities. The value of the three-year grant is \$3.8 million, and the monies would go toward the new firefighters' salary for two years, and the county would pay costs in the third year.
- Passed a proclamation declaring that POW/MIA (Prisoners of War/Missing In Action) flags be flown over all county buildings for one year.
- Declared March as "Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities Awareness Month" in Citrus County
- Heard an update to the county's part of the national Neighborhood Stabilization Program, which will total \$1,005,084 for Citrus County. The target area is in Beverly Hills, which has an approximately 20 percent foreclosure rate in a specific area. The program will be augmented by the Economic Development Council, which hopes to get at \$300,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to weatherize any homes purchased with the stabilization program's grant money. County spokeswoman Heidi Blanchette says her agency hopes to purchase at least nine properties, which will be "renovate and sell," and not "renovate and rent." The goal is to get people back into those homes, she said.

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