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Fort Pierce seeks more information on impact fee issue

By ALEXI HOWK

alex.howk@scripps.com

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FORT PIERCE — Libraries and parks are filling up. Boat ramps are overcrowded. Existing housing developments like Harbour Isle sit empty.

Those are some of the things city commissioners took into consideration Monday night when grappling with whether to start imposing city impact fees, in addition to county impact fees, to pay for increased services caused by new development.

Commissioners said that before they would agree to move forward with imposing fees, they wanted impact fee comparisons from Stuart, Vero Beach and Port St. Lucie. They also want feedback from the Treasure Coast Builders Association and Realtor associations.

With a sluggish housing market, whether the timing is right or not, the money to pay for the city's infrastructure has to come from somewhere, officials said. But the question was whether it come from the general fund or in the form of impact fees.

"If we don't get the impact fee structure set up, we're going to have to pay for infrastructure out of the general fund, and we won't be able to lower the (tax) rate," Commissioner Eddie Becht said. "And that's going to frighten people away."

Becht noted that the county impact fees, coupled with city fees, would be too high.

During a workshop last year, city officials began contemplating impact fees and commissioned a \$133,000 study by consultants Tindale-Oliver & Associates.

At a June 4 meeting, the city's consultant unveiled proposed fees the city would need to charge to keep up with the demands of future development. The city's comprehensive plan projects a 62 percent increase in the city's population by 2020.

The city collects impact fees for the county and charges a 4 percent administrative fee. In addition to that fee, the city gets to retain 20 percent of the fees for road improvements and 50 percent for parks. However, the amount collected has not been as much as city officials would like.

About six months ago, Port St. Lucie decided to stop collecting county impact fees and instead impose its own fees. The matter sparked heated debate, and the two parties still are trying to work out a legal agreement to resolve the matter.

Commissioner R. "Duke" Nelson argued against the fees, saying they would deter people from coming to Fort Pierce.

"Our needs are not the same as Port St. Lucie," Nelson said, noting Fort Pierce is more than 100 years old. "We are trying to get people to come to our city and help people build in our city."

"I think the fact that we don't have a universal impact fee is an asset to us, relative to the renaissance or resurgence of our city. We have a jewel here that has a whole lot of gold under the ground in terms of infrastructure. We don't need to gauge people."

Mayor Bob Benton inquired whether the city could exempt retail and commercial developments from being charged impact fees, considering the city is "begging" for this type of development, and charge fees only on residential developments.

However, Deputy City Manager David Recor said it would be "patently unfair to tax the residential side" and make those developments bear the burden.

Once city officials agree to move forward with impact fees, there will be three public hearings. Once an ordinance is adopted, the impact fees go into effect 90 days from adoption.

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