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Has the lack of impact fees spurred growth in the county?

By Bill Thompson
Staff writer
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It's a tale of two fees.

In the coming months, residents of southeast Ocala will be able to cruise the aisles of a new Publix along Southeast Maricamp Road.

For generating all the traffic outside the store, the grocer would have paid $126,722 in transportation impact fees — if Marion County still collected such fees.

A company spokesman said in an email that since Publix had been planning to build that store since 2008, the fact that the county stopped assessing impact fees in early 2010 had "no bearing" on the decision to build.

On the other hand, Fort McCoy business owner Richard Taylor said the county's policy of not taking a $6,099 transportation impact fee out of his pocket greatly influenced his decision to re-enter the housing market.

For 22 years Taylor has bought used mobile homes, installed them on vacant land he owns and sold them to low-income residents. But he stopped more than a year ago because the overhead costs and regulatory oversight became too overbearing.

"You slap a $6,000 fee on a $300,000 home, you're talking 5 percent. But on a $40,000 home, it's 15 percent. I can't live with that. It makes it unprofitable," Taylor said.

But with profits in sight, Taylor is willing to wade back into the market.

"The economy is as bad as it has been in my lifetime," said Taylor, 61. "They needed to do anything to encourage some kind of growth, and I'm glad they're doing it. That's a huge difference."

As Marion County's experiment of not collecting impact fees continues, the experiences of Publix and Taylor illustrate that the impact of no impact fees has been mixed to this point.

In January 2010, the Marion County Commission voted to temporarily stop collecting transportation impact fees and later extended that for all of last year.

Six months ago, the board extended the effort to the end of 2012 and last month voted to no longer accept impacts fees — including school and fire service fees — until at least 2013.

The moves were viewed by the board and supporters as a way to spark economic growth and create jobs, especially in the cratering construction industry, by enticing companies to build in Marion County.

"Visibly, the construction industry has been the hardest hit industry in Marion County, and the impact fee suspensions help create jobs, retain current jobs and keep our community economically competitive," Francine Johannesen, CEO of the Marion County Building Industry Association, said in a statement issued last month after the board approved ending the collection of fees for schools and fire protection.

"With the current credit crisis, there is a considerable gap in homebuyers' ability to secure a loan for a new home. Suspending all impact fees will help shrink that gap . . . to allow citizens to realize the American dream of homeownership."

County records, however, indicate that new construction continues to lag anyway.

Impact fees historically have been collected to offset the cost of new growth. Developers paid them to help fund the expansion of services necessary to serve new homes and businesses.

Marion County charged a total impact fee of roughly $10,400 per new home for construction of new roads, schools and fire protection. The rate for non-residential structures varied by type and size.

The revenues were then spent on projects in one of the four districts in which they were collected.

In a report to the County Commission in early July, Rick Michael, director of the county's Office of Economic and Small Business development, noted that over the last 18 months the collection stoppage had cost the county nearly $6.6 million for road projects — at a time when road construction is the cheapest in recent memory.

Almost half that money would have funded projects in the southwest quadrant of the county, including the congested State Road 200 corridor.

The story behind the numbers, however, is the yearly breakdown.

In 2010 the county left on the table $5.2 million in transportation impact fees. In one sense, that might have demonstrated the success of the County Commission's policy.

The amount collected in 2009 was $3.4 million, according to Kim Hatcher, the county's impact fee coordinator. That was also when new growth in the county appeared to hit bottom.

In 2008, the county had taken in $17.7 million in transportation impact fees, which was down from $24.5 million in 2007.

Yet for the first six months of this year, the abated amount is almost $1.4 million.

That projects to $2.8 million by the end of the year, suggesting that new construction is declining.

It is possible that the timing of payments might increase the final 2011 total.

County Growth Management Director Jimmy Massey explained that the county collected transportation impact fees when projects were nearing completion.

The city of Ocala, which under a local ordinance collects the fees and turns the revenue over to the county, makes developers pay up front on commercial projects and upon completion for residential efforts, Massey said.

So, developers of some projects now under way possibly have not yet paid.

To underscore that point, the county last year still received about $1 million in transportation impact fee revenue for projects that were permitted in 2009, before the suspension policy took effect, Hatcher said.

Other economic yardsticks suggest small gains, if any at all.

For example, in the 18-month period before the suspension went into effect, the county issued 694 permits for single-family homes and 70 for commercial projects, county records indicate.

Since January 2010, 556 single-family home permits have been handed out, as well as 36 permits for commercial projects.

Then there is the effect on employment.

Unemployment has come down somewhat during the past 18 months.

In December 2009, the county's unemployment rate stood at 14.4 percent and peaked at 15.5 percent two months later.

According to the latest state figures released on July 22, Marion County's unemployment rate is now at 12.6 percent.

Some of that is due to business expansion. For instance, an Ocala-Marion County Chamber of Commerce program that encouraged member businesses to hire at least one new employee during 2011 has added more than 350 new jobs so far.

But that more recent unemployment figure had crept up from 12 percent the month before.

County economic development officials also noted recently that unemployment may be down because benefits have run out for many jobless workers and they are no longer considered in the totals.

Meanwhile, the segment of the work force that the suspension was supposed to help most remains flat.

As of June, according to state data, 6,200 people were employed in the construction industry.

In June 2010, there were 6,300 such workers; in December 2009, that number was 6,700.

Massey, the growth manager, said he could not recall any "significant" projects that took root simply because the board had ended the collection of impact fees.

"One could argue it really hasn't spurred any activity, or take that further and say it's because of the general recession," Massey said.

But advocates maintain the policy will bear fruit in time.

Pete Tesch, president and CEO of the Ocala-Marion County Economic Development Corp., said while developers and companies in Florida have grown accustomed to factoring the cost of impact fees into their projects, the charges were always an "issue of contention."

As the state's economy has swooned, other Florida communities have tabled or drastically reduced impact fees to spur economic activity and boost their competitiveness, he added.

And that, Tesch said, makes a big difference to manufacturers, wholesale distributors, call centers and other businesses that consume a lot of land and would spend hundreds of thousands of dollars — if not millions — in impact fees.

"We still have double-digit unemployment and whatever we can do from a public policy standpoint to encourage any type of development is helpful," Tesch said.

The suspension of impact-fee collection may not always be "the driving factor" in a company's choice to build in Marion County, but it remains an "element that would help in that decision."

Johannesen, of the Building Industry Association, said timing was an issue. The suspension would likely have more positive results as it extends through 2012.

"If people aren't coming here to live, and if nobody's building, we know it's not going to help," she said. "But we're starting to see some different things happening nationwide, and housing is starting to look better."

Without that extra costs, she added, would help buyers get better deals on homes and help builders to sell them.

County Commissioner Carl Zalak, the most vocal supporter of suspending impact fees, said he knew of some projects now in the planning-review pipeline that went forward because the developer did not have to pay the additional costs.

"That's made all the difference for these small businesses, allowing them to survive," he said. "It's another economic development tool we have."

As for the jobs, Zalak added, "You might say we could have lost more jobs had we not had it."

Zalak believes the benefits will come, noting that several new companies have committed to Marion County or are leaning toward doing so because they won't have to pay big money just to build.

"That allows those companies to add that money back in to build bigger buildings and facilities and we can recapture that money through their taxes," Zalak said. "It's the closer."

Contact Bill Thompson at 867-4117 or at bill.thompson@starbanner.com.