

Impact fees stay, hiring freeze goes and comes

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CHIPLEY – Washington County Board of County Commissioners is keeping impact fees and temporarily dropped its hiring freeze. Both actions were taken at the last regular meeting of the year Thursday afternoon.

County Attorney Gerald Holley told the Board that it would be necessary to pass an ordinance to set up a moratorium, and the ordinance would have to be advertised. Pate said the fees have raised about \$110,000 so far.

The last Board approved a one-year moratorium on collecting impact fees by vote, but was then told that an ordinance was necessary.

The current Board voted 3-2 on Thursday to keep collecting the fees for EMS, fire and transportation. Chairman Bill Howell and Commissioners Donnie Ray Strickland and Joel Pate voted to keep collecting and Commissioners Charles Brock and Eddie Holman voted for the moratorium.

Brock said the moratorium would be a good thing, particularly for young couples, “trying to get a start in life.” Brock also noted that the economy was “in one of the worst turmoils in history.” Brock suggested a one-cent sales tax, a utility tax or some other type of tax to substitute for impact fees.

Strickland said he voted for the moratorium on the last Board, but he said that after visiting local fire departments he changed his mind. “The fire departments are falling behind,” Strickland said. “I hope and pray it (the impact fee) will crank. The only way we can have something is with the impact fees.”

Howell noted that with cuts in state money and the upcoming special session of the legislature expected to produce deeper cuts, the County is getting hard pressed to provide services. Impact fees paid by developers and homeowners are one way to help fund services.

“The County has needs,” Howell said. “Nobody wants to pay more taxes, but if you want services you have to figure out some way to pay for them.”

Holman said current commissioners needed to honor the decision by the former Board.

Realtor Jim Town said he believed that there was evidence of impact fees adversely affecting growth. Town noted that if the full transportation impact fee was charged, the fees would only add about \$2,300 toward a single-family home with a 30-year mortgage. “That’s about an extra \$13 a month in

payment,” Town said. The last Board approved charging only half of the transportation fee.

A 10,000-square-foot retail building would pay about \$11,000. “That works out to about seven cents a square foot in extra rent,” Town said. “I have been involved in developing over 500 buildings and I never said I would not build because of an impact fee. They have an insignificant effect on development.

Town and licensed mortgage broker Karen Schoen said that impact fees are almost always rolled into mortgages.

Howell asked County Administrator Pete Herbert to assemble a group to review how the impact fees are applied and how they work in a mortgage.

The Board also temporarily dropped its hiring moratorium to fill three inmate supervisor positions. One in District 2 needs to be filled immediately, one for Sunny Hills MSBU needs to be filled in spring, and one needs to be filled in March 2009 when a supervisor retires.

Once the vote was taken the Board put the freeze back on by a 4-1 vote, with Brock opposing.

In other news, the Board:

- Approved transferring a position from the building department to recycling to provide help with paperwork and dealing with the public. If the position is moved to recycling it would be funded by the recycling grant and would come out of the building department’s budget. The employee would work out of public works on Campbellton Highway until security is improved at recycling on State 77.
- Approved setting up a meeting with Carr, Riggs and Engram, the Board’s auditing firm, about a one-year extension proposed by the company. The Board was originally prepared to sign the extension, but found out that it would cost about \$119,000. Board members said they were told that fees would be reduced if they hired their own certified public accountant, but fees actually increased about \$4,000 because of a three percent cost for inflation, “new auditing standards,” and the need for the auditor to spend time in any office where money was collected.
- Heard Tourist Development Council Chairman Paul Goulding provide an update on TDC activities. The TDC collects and disburses funds collected through a “bed tax” on hotels rooms and other lodging. Funds are spent on tourist-related activities in the county, and two-thirds of the money must be spent outside of the county to attract tourists to Washington Count according to state law.

Goulding also asked Holley to let the TDC know what was the proper mechanism for using telephone or email to poll members.

Goulding said the TDC budget was good and praised the Board, the Chamber of Commerce and others for being good partners. The Board also approved new three-year terms for Goulding and Ted Everett.

- Approved advertising for construction of the new Emergency Operations Center in Wausau. It appears that good prices are available at present.