

County given impact fee idea

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A parade of state, county and private-sector leaders met for a Pasco Economic Development Council luncheon Friday to revisit the region's traffic problems.

They spoke of broad challenges - high construction costs and booming populations, among others - even as the county is facing pressures from developers to cut its proposed increases to the road impact fee, a tax on new construction that pays for transportation improvements.

But the most interesting idea came from offstage.

Architect-developer Frank Starkey is suggesting that the county do something it's never tried before: introduce a sliding scale of impact fees that would favor developments that lessen their loads on local roads.

The county is listening - though officials are nowhere close to embracing the idea.

If the proposal takes off, it would end the current practice of levying the same road impact fee regardless of a property owner's location.

Instead, it would bring in a computer-assisted system that varies the tax according to where residents and businesses

choose to build.

Starkey's proposal comes at a time when the county is struggling to arrive at a reasonable increase for the road impact fee.

The county is thinking of tripling these impact fees to keep up with dizzying growth.

The development community thinks the increase is too drastic and would drive out business if implemented. Most in the industry want the county to cut the hike.

Starkey's response: Don't cut it. Just tier it.

"Location is an important consideration for impact fee relief," Starkey said. "My proposal is that the impact fee should be used as a tool to encourage development patterns that reduce traffic demand."

As it stands, the county's proposal would see impact fees rise from \$3,900 to a state-high of \$13,000 for each house built. Different rates are charged for different building categories; businesses like fast-food restaurants face even heftier proposed increases.

If Starkey had his way, the \$13,000 top-end rate would stay, but only be applied to developments that choose to build in rural areas far away from commercial establishments, since they would most dramatically raise existing traffic loads.

If the developments choose to build closer to existing stores or offices, or design an internal road system that takes the burden off public roads, or incorporate pedestrian- or bicycle-friendly trails, they should qualify for lower impact fees, he said.

"If the development pattern were to shift to one which lowered traffic demand, the impact could be lower," he said.

Starkey, an architect by training, is heavily involved in New Urbanism, a nationwide antisprawl movement that emphasizes walkability and highly connected internal street systems within communities.

As a Pasco developer, Starkey steered Longleaf, a development outside New Port Richey that emphasizes these New Urbanism values.

On Thursday, he will meet with Assistant County Attorney David Goldstein and engineering services administrator Michele Baker to explore his impact fee proposal.

Starkey may have some convincing to do.

Goldstein said he fears a sliding scale would saddle Pasco's building department with an implementation nightmare: how to decide which location befits which level of impact fees?

Starkey may have an answer: Criterion Planners of Portland, Ore., has a software program called INDEX, which crunches data to identify development locations that reduce sprawl. Such a program could link to the impact fees.

But Starkey may have joined the debate too late.

"There are already two studies out there," Goldstein said, referring to consultant studies that underlie the impact fee debate. "I'm not sure we want a third study."

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