

## Lee commissioners toy with impact fee cut, seem to nix all-out moratorium

By KRISTINE GILL

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Although an all-out moratorium looks increasingly unlikely, Lee County commissioners seemed to agree Monday that a reduction in impact fees could benefit builders and the local economy.

But the size of the reduction remains to be seen.

A presentation by staff showed Lee County's impact fees are among the highest in the state. In January, Commissioner John Manning proposed a 2-year moratorium for the fees, charging nothing to builders of new homes and businesses. Under the proposal, commissioners would review the system after the first year before agreeing to continue for a second.

At Monday's Management and Planning meeting, Commissioners Cecil Pendergrass, Tammy Hall, Larry Kiker and Frank Mann all said they could not support Manning's full moratorium proposal. Instead, they toyed with the possibility of a significant decrease for two years by as much as 80 percent.

Pendergrass said if it's cheaper for a builder to build in Charlotte or Sarasota counties, more companies will choose to build there. A reduction in fees could encourage them to choose Lee County.

"We need to create a business-friendly government," he said. "We have to compete in a regional market."

Kiker gave a presentation referencing a study that showed \$1 billion in annual construction would create 25,000 jobs, which he said would significantly impact the county's unemployment rate. He proposed a sliding scale of fees to respond to the changing market as more or fewer permits are asked for over time, starting with an 80 percent reduction in fees.

"When you get to rapid growth, that's when fees should be higher," he said.

Lee County's impact fee per permit is \$12,500, which Kiker said "is too much." An 80 percent reduction would make the fee \$2,500.

Mann said he would be willing to look at fee reductions in certain geographic areas of the county.

But he said he did not agree with Kiker that the price of impact fees is the singular factor affecting growth in the county. He said he did not want to forfeit fees from large commercial companies like Wal-Mart, which are ready to pay them and build now.

“We have all of these other economic factors,” Mann said.

The staff presentation showing Lee County’s impact fees among the state’s highest also did little to convince Mann that they should disappear. Lee’s fees are still less than Collier County’s, officials said.

“I don’t think it’s unusual at all to find ourselves at the high end of fees charged, and we’re lucky to have that,” Mann said, citing the county’s rapid growth in past years. “It’s going to take more than a list of counties showing us at the high end to panic me into moving to the middle.”

Mann said he wanted to see how a reduction in fees by 80 percent or 60 percent would affect the county’s budget and other projects.

Manning said he’d be willing to listen to the commissioners suggestions for other amounts for reductions in fees. Commissioners are expected to vote on a figure at their March 12 meeting.



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