



## Lee drops linkage fees from possible consideration

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD

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Lee County commissioners still don't know what specifically to do about workforce housing.

But they know what they're not going to do.

Commissioners granted a development group's request this week to eliminate linkage fees from the menu of options they're considering. They backed away — again — from eliminating or rolling back impact fees.

Linkage fees are like impact fees for affordable housing. They work by establishing a link between the services a resident of a new home demands and the housing needs of the low-income workers that provide those services.

Work done by a consultant last year pegged that cost at \$1,110 for a new 2,000-square-foot home. Commissioners have never adopted a linkage fee, but Steve Hartsell, a local land use attorney and the new president of the Real Estate Investment Society, said it hangs out there scaring away investment.

"It's one issue that continues to stand out there as a disincentive," he told commissioners at a workshop this week. "When there's high impact fees, and there's discussion of linkage fees, that has an impact."

Hartsell was part of a group put together by the Horizon Council, the county's public-private economic advisory board. He echoed what commissioners said — that the slumping housing market has reduced the sense of urgency.

"The economy seems to have taken care of the initial problem we looked at last year which was the high cost of housing," he said. "On the other hand, the same folks we were trying to provide housing for may not have the means to afford it now."

Commissioners all agreed not to consider linkage fees, but said waiving or eliminating impact fees is not an option.

"I'm not one who said to drop impact fees," Commissioner Frank Mann said. "We have two ways to pay for infrastructure. Impact fees, where new people who help cause the impact help pay, or taxpayers. Folks, that's the bottom line."

Chairman Ray Judah repeated a call for a real estate transfer fee, a fee the state would collect on every land sale.

"If we're going to seriously consider impact fees, we're going to have to have a dedicated funding source to replace them," he said. "It's not going to be placed on the backs of the taxpayers of this county."

The local Building Industry Association and the Board of Realtors have pushed to eliminate impact fees to boost building and sales. Stephanie Keyes, director of government affairs for the Realtors Association of Fort Myers and the Beach, points to other southwest Florida counties.

Charlotte County recently rolled back their fees to 1998 levels. Sarasota County froze its fees. DeSoto County and Hendry County both agreed to waive fees for six months.

Commissioner Tammy Hall said if commissioners want to tackle workforce housing there are straightforward ways, like allowing higher densities to keep home prices down.

"It goes to smart growth," she said. "To put people where people should be."

That's close to commercial centers and public transit, she said.

"I want all five of us to realize what bonus density is and not to make it so political," she said.