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## County defers impact-fee jump

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County officials tried to nudge the ailing housing industry Tuesday by holding off an annual increase of impact fees, a government tax placed on new homes to offset their effect on the community.

County commissioners were divided over whether to adopt the 2.5 percent increase and keep future increases smaller, or offer up a symbolic gesture to help builders and the economy. In the end, the board decided in favor of the private sector.

"The economy is suffering because of the housing industry, and this small amount for the temporary period we're talking about does not make economic sense to me," Commissioner Ron Getman said. "It's like kicking someone when they're down."

Earlier in the day, the commission unanimously agreed to ask the Florida Department of Transportation to shift \$3.2 million in federal dollars from the U.S. 301/Fort Hamer Road intersection in Parrish to the U.S. 301/Interstate 75 interchange in Ellenton. Commissioners said the federal money isn't worth the delays, cost increases and stricter requirements that accompany it.

"Federalizing puts more burden on us and there's no additional funding from the federal government," said Commissioner Amy Stein.

Work on the Ellenton interchange could begin later this year. Prime Retail has plans to expand its Prime Outlets-Ellenton and will offer the county \$3.5 million in cash and impact-fee credits to widen the road.

Homebuilders lauded the plan to defer the impact-fee increase, as proposed by County Administrator Ed Hunzeker in December. None were on hand to support it Tuesday. With home sales down, Hunzeker said, the deferral will have a minor impact on the county's finances.

Commissioner Joe McClash and Stein said revenues from the fee increase were too much to defer, and voted against giving the break.

"While it sounds good, if you're deferring it now, how are you going to justify raising it 50 percent in the future?" McClash said. "Two percent is probably insignificant to some people buying new homes. But that times 1,000 homes is a lot of money. There has to be a realization that impact fees aren't close to where they need to be to support growth."

Hunzeker estimated that the 2.5 percent increase on the average new home would amount to about \$195. He alluded to a plan that could allow new homebuyers to finance impact fees over a 20- or 30-year period.

Five of seven commissioners agreed, including the board's new chairman, Jane von Hahmann.

"Here's one opportunity to take a 'don't kick 'em when they're down' step," she said.

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