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## North Port may slice impact fees

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NORTH PORT -- Eager to lure businesses to North Port, the city will review the impact fees it charges commercial builders to see whether cuts could provide a competitive edge.

On Tuesday, the commission said it would look at the fees charged by neighboring governments for shopping centers, offices and industry and perhaps make cuts where North Port's exceed other areas.

The city is coming off a commercial and residential impact fee rollback that went into effect last month. Surrounding counties, including Sarasota and Charlotte, have likewise cut fees or delayed planned increases to ease the pain of the current real estate crunch.

Impact fees are one-time charges governments assess builders to pay for roads, water lines and other infrastructure needed because of growth.

North Port was among the fastest growing cities in the country after 2000. The regional real estate downturn has hit hard here, with the city reaching five-year lows for home building permits twice in 2007.

But North Port's commercial building has remained strong when compared with the area's steep decline in home building.

"The housetops were here prior and now the stores are catching up," said Commissioner Richard Lockhart.

However, city leaders fear that impact fees could drive new businesses to nearby Charlotte County, where fees were recently rolled back to 1998 levels.

The city is also exploring ways to use impact fee waivers as bargaining chips when wooing businesses. These fees can easily exceed \$1 million for large-scale projects such as shopping centers.

Even with possible rollbacks for commercial construction coming, some local builders were disappointed that the city did not lower the cost for home builders.

"My latest three projects were in Charlotte County, not North Port," local builder Nick Bonsky told commissioners.

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