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Lake commissioners move ahead with plan to extend moratorium on transportation impact fees

By Eloísa Ruano González, Orlando Sentinel

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TAVARES — County commissioners agreed this week to move ahead with extending a moratorium on collecting transportation impact fees for the next year.

Commissioner Welton Cadwell has long supported impact fees for building and improving roads. However, he said he wouldn't support collecting fees in this grim economy.

"These are different times," Cadwell said during a commission workshop held at Camp Challenge in Sorrento.

"Impact fees are going to be part of our long-range plan," he added. "But not now."

Commissioner Jimmy Conner backed him. At a time of falling property values and high unemployment, Conner said it's necessary to continue the suspension of impact fees, which are based on the size and nature of the project. He said it would relieve pressure on commercial and home builders, while stimulating the economy and job market.

Conner, who cited figures provided by Lake's economic development office, credited an earlier transportation impact-fee suspension for adding 630 private-sector jobs and \$10 million in taxable property values.

"It's proven to be successful," he said. "It's justified based on the data."

Conner argued that several counties in the state already waive impact fees, which can save developers thousands in upfront charges and provides a sweetened financial incentive to start up a new business.

"We've got to be competitive with other counties" to attract more businesses and jobs in Lake, he said during the meeting.

Linda Nagle, executive director of the Home Builders Association of Lake-Sumter, urged commissioners to extend the moratorium. The fees add no value to the home but drive up the price, she said. Suspending them could increase home-buying in the county, she said.

"The impact fees make a huge difference in the ability to sell a new home," Nagle said at the meeting, where public input was allowed.

Meanwhile, Nancy Hurlbert, who sits on the capital facilities advisory committee, was disappointed in the commission's decision. Instead of building new homes, she said there needs to be an emphasis on selling existing or foreclosed homes.

"The impact fees would discourage new building," said Hurlbert, who also serves as Lake Democratic chairwoman.

Commission Chairwoman Leslie Campione favored a reduced impact fee over a continued moratorium. That would allow staffers to negotiate with developers to build roads, she said. But seeing no support, she also backed the idea.

Commissioners directed County Attorney Sandy Minkoff to draft an ordinance that would extend the moratorium and bring it back for a vote at the next meeting.

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The extension won't apply to the existing school impact-fee suspension, which sunsets in April. Nonetheless, School Board Chairwoman Debbie Stivender urged commissioners sit down with School Board members to discuss the need of impact fees to fund schools. Only county commissioners have the authority to impose impact fees.

"We need the funding," said Stivender, a former county commissioner.

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