



## Polk County Rejects Plans To Cut Impact Fees

By BILLY TOWNSEND, The Tampa Tribune

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BARTOW - The Polk County Commission rejected a pair of efforts to roll back the county's impact fees during a contentious Wednesday afternoon hearing.

County Commissioner Jack Myers' motion to reduce the fees by half was met with silence - and then grumbles from the overflow crowd that gathered for the hearing today.

Minutes later, Myers proposed a 25 percent reduction. Commission chairman Sam Johnson seconded the motion, but it failed in a 3-2 vote.

That disappointed dozens of men and women with ties to the building industry, who filled county parking lots with their work trucks. Many supporters of the rollback wore red, white and blue badges and held signs reading "Save Our Jobs."

Many of them spoke of laying off workers or struggling to find work themselves in the wake of the housing industry's sharp slowdown.

Supporters, led by Myers, who proposed the rollback, billed it as a short-term plan designed to kick-start Polk's home building industry.

A slightly smaller group of opponents of the rollback argued that the housing market slowdown is a product of overbuilding during a housing bubble and that impact fees are needed to help pay for the needs generated by the new residents who bought homes before the bubble burst.

The county collects impact fees to help fund seven different general government sectors: emergency-ambulance service, fire, jail, law enforcement, roads, libraries and parks. The county also collects a school impact fee, but that was not a part of this effort. Including the school fee, the county collects \$11,821 on a single-family home.

That places Polk in about the middle for area counties. The 50 percent rollback would have dropped that to \$7,996.

As a pair of county economists pointed out, however, there were more than 5,200 existing homes listed for sale in the county as of December. During that same month, only 250 sold. Based on that rate of absorption, it will take 21 months to absorb the inventory of existing homes.

"I think adding new homes right now might be counterproductive," Commissioner Randy

Wilkinson said.

Gordon Kettle, an economist with Polk's economic development agency, said: "I don't think cutting impact fees is going to make much of a difference. It's not going to restore the housing market to what it was. We could lower impact fees to zero, and it wouldn't change this housing market overnight."

At the same time, the commercial construction industry has stayed fairly strong, according to county officials.

Also, cutting impact fees would reduce money available for infrastructure projects. A paper prepared by county staff members cited at least two road projects now under construction that could be threatened, possibly including the Pace Road project, which would provide vital access to the University of South Florida's proposed new campus near Interstate 4.

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