

# Impact fees set; now let's rein in spending

By Times editorial

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No one was going to leave the County Commission meeting Thursday evening entirely happy with the board's decision on how much to raise the impact fees. But the compromise reached was about as palatable a solution as was likely under the circumstances.

Those who wanted the impact fees left at their current levels did not prevail. Neither did the advocates for raising all eight categories of the one-time fees on new construction to the amounts recommended by a consultant.

Instead, six of the eight categories will hit the highest levels, while the two big-ticket fees - for building roads and schools - will climb by 50 percent of the recommended amount on June 1. They could rise the other 50 percent on Jan. 31, 2008, depending on the results of an economic study the board also approved on Thursday.

This will boost the impact fee on a typical single-family home from the current \$6,665 to \$9,315. That's a 40 percent bump, but less than the \$17,500 that was recommended.

It will generate an estimated \$19.5-million in new revenue to the county this year, but the 50/50 split will mean the county won't collect another \$8.4-million that would have been available had the fees gone to their full amount June 1.

Still, \$19.5-million is a significant amount of new money to spend. Add that to the \$10-million in new revenue because of higher property values, the roughly \$3-million brought in this year by a higher gas tax, plus millions more in sales tax dollars, assessments, fines and other sources, and there is a virtual tsunami of public money flowing into the various pockets of local government.

There are, of course, strings attached to most of those dollars, starting with the impact fee millions. However, every dime is supposed to go to the public good in some way, and those paying the bills expect their money to be collected prudently and spent efficiently.

That has not always been the case, and the commissioners now must put real action behind their vows on Thursday to better scrutinize spending.

That must apply not just to the commissioners but to every constitutional officer, school district official and member of the judiciary. The taxpayers of Citrus County should not be thought of as walking money trees, ready to be plucked at an elected official's whim.

Commissioners also made a significant decision to order a study of the various revenue sources available to the county. This study will be funded through the occupational license fees that Citrus businesses pay annually and must be conducted by an independent credible body not connected in any way to the local business sector. The state's universities offer research arms that typically conduct such analyses.

The goal is to give the public and the commissioners a reliable view of how much money is needed to meet the county's various needs as well as the best ways to find these dollars. The study should also look at the impact of impact fees, especially what happens to the property tax rates when impact fees are kept artificially low, as well as

what happens to the local building community when the fees are raised.

Both issues have generated intense debate in recent years and it is time for the commissioners to rely on facts and not speculation and conjecture when they make their decisions.

This kind of information from an objective source is so essential that one wonders why such a study has been so long in coming.

The officeholders, however, should not wait for the study results to start looking for ways to stretch their tax dollars.

Some of that is already under way. On Friday, for example, a group of county officials met with school district workers to look at the new moveable concrete classrooms that the district has been using to ease the space crunch on some campuses. The "concreteables," as they are known, are an economical yet safe and reliable solution to a growing problem. If they work for the school district, why not for the county?

The county is also talking about privatizing the Animal Services division. While they are at it, they should look at public works, fleet maintenance and other departments. Maybe they are best left alone, but maybe not. No one really knows until all options are examined.

There are efficiencies to be found at every level of government, from the school district to the Sheriff's Office. All that is needed is a concerted effort to find the fat.

On Thursday night, as the marathon hearing mercifully came to a close, County Commission chairman Dennis Damato proudly proclaimed, "It's a new day in Citrus County."

For the sake of the beleaguered Citrus County taxpayer and business owner, we hope so.

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