

## Santa Rosa suspends fee to spur growth

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February 2, 2009 - 8:57PM

MILTON - Walmart is probably wishing it could ask for a refund after the Santa Rosa County Commission recently decided to suspend collection of impact fees.

County commissioners voted last week to suspend transportation impact fees for all of 2009 in an attempt to stimulate growth.

"What the board hopes happens is it will be the difference in whether someone decides to go forward with beginning a project," said Santa Rosa County Administrator Hunter Walker. "In other words, for it to be an incentive or at least to remove an impediment that may stop a project from starting."

The suspension is good only for building permits issued in 2009. Any permit issued before that must still pay their full impact fee. The commission did allow those paying their impact fees in installments to defer making this year's payment until next year.

Impact fees are charged to all new residential and commercial buildings as a way to offset the cost of the infrastructure improvements that are needed because of new development.

Walker was hopeful that suspending the impact fees would promote growth. He said the fee to build a new home was \$2,000, while a small business would likely pay between \$15,000 and \$20,000. A large development like Walmart, which paid impact fees for its Navarre store under protest in May 2006, could cost more than \$800,000.

Santa Rosa County started charging the impact fees to all new developments on Jan. 1, 2006. For the three years the impact fees have been in place, the county collected \$8.4 million, said Joel Haniford, the county's finance director.

However, the county saw a dramatic decrease in the fees collected last year. The county collected \$1.8 million in impact fees last year, about half the amount collected the previous year.

"The board hopes it spurs somebody to go ahead and pull a building permit and build a project," Walker said.

Suspending the impact fees does mean Santa Rosa County will have less money to complete its future road improvement projects.

The only ongoing project in active development to be funded with the impact fees is the improvements to the Five Points intersection in Pace. The county has currently budgeted to design the intersection improvements using the impact fee funds.