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Senator proposes impact fee ban Mike Bennett also suggests change to growth reviews

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MANATEE — A local state senator has filed a bill in the Florida Legislature that would block collection of developers' impact fees for three years.

Another bill proposed by the senator would eliminate most state growth management review of big, new developments by revising laws relating to the state Department of Community Affairs.

The proposals, submitted by State Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, on Tuesday drew fire from an environmentalist, support from a developer and mixed reviews from two county commissioners.

Bennett argued that the way impact fees are currently assessed is inequitable.

"Impact fees in the State of Florida have not been administered fairly across the state," said Bennett. In Manatee County, "we know our impact fees on medical (construction) are way out of whack."

His proposal would not abolish impact fees, but would "encourage businesses to come to Florida and create jobs," he said.

Impact fees are charged on new construction to pay for new roads and additional public services needed because of development. Bradenton city officials are already considering providing relief to developers.

Discussing the other bill, S.B. 360 dealing with growth management, Bennett said he hoped "to encourage denser communities and discourage sprawl out east, cut out duplicate regulations we have."

Noting the state has several agencies all reviewing the same projects, Bennett noted, "It's a big waste of money. People of Florida are demanding we cut down the waste in Florida, and that's what we're trying to do."

The Senate Community Affairs Committee, chaired by Bennett, Tuesday unanimously approved it.

Glenn Compton, director of local environmental group ManaSota-88, complained about S.B. 630 would give financial breaks to developers.

"If Sen. Bennett wishes to reduce impact fees on new development, that means existing residents will have to pay more for the cost of new growth, and ultimately the general public will not want to pay more taxes to serve the growth industry," Compton said.

Of changes in growth management policies, he said, "The State of Florida doesn't have a good handle on growth management now, and having less oversight will not change that."

Favoring such changes was Todd Pokrywa, a vice president of planning for Schroeder Manatee Ranch, developer of Lakewood Ranch, who contended Bennett's bill does not go far enough.

"We are very supportive of Sen. Bennett's efforts, but also believe more should still be done with this opportunity to assist with recovery of the Florida economy," he said. "With respect to S.B. 360, it is a step in the right direction to address the obstacles that urban areas face in being competitive for economic development and job creation opportunities."

The bill would eliminate Development of Regional Impact (DRI) requirements for projects in local jurisdictions with an average of 1,000 people or more per square mile, Pokrywa said.

"Unfortunately, this does not go far enough yet," he explained. "'The State's DRI program is something that arguably may have made some sense in the 1980s but since its inception, local government comprehensive plans have been adopted, and today, it is duplicative of many of requisite permitting efforts,'" said Pokrywa.

The state's process is so time-consuming and costly that potential builders become discouraged and go elsewhere, he added.

Of the impact fee bill, County Commissioner Carol Whitmore noted, "I know we've all talked about making them more equitable, but blocking them, I'd have to talk to the financial staff."

Still, she noted that "impact fees are supposed to be paying for new growth, and if there's no new growth, it wouldn't affect my budget."

County Commissioner Joe McClash said that temporarily blocking impact fees would not stimulate economic growth.

"There's no studies that say exempting impact fees will spur the economy," McClash said. "We have to first fill the empty buildings we have, or we'll have more ghost towns being built. It's not a matter of more building, but building an economic base for the State of Florida."

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