

Impact fee equivocating should end

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Hernando County commissioners on Tuesday begrudgingly acknowledged they must have a better plan for the future by asking new residents to pay their fair share for government services.

A three-year experiment of reduced impact fees failed to re-energize the home-building industry and it cost the county and school district \$4 million in uncollected fees. The ploy nearly emptied county's capital accounts for libraries and parks and left the fire department facing a five-year deficit in its equipment budget. Meanwhile, home-building starts remained flat, averaging just 12 to 16 new permits each month, since the county halved its impact fees in 2009 and then waived the charges altogether 14 months ago.

It's hard to ignore the drawbacks from this ill-advised economic stimulus effort. Unfortunately, a series of convoluted motions and votes Tuesday morning, demonstrated the commission's still questionable commitment to restoring modest impact fees for public safety, parks and libraries. The hand-wringing came even though more expensive fees for roads and schools — that previously totaled \$7,900 per single-family home — won't be considered for several more months.

Tuesday, after much consternation, the commission unanimously approved a new ordinance calling for impact fees of \$1,387 for new single-family homes that will drop to \$1,312 on Oct. 1. But, Commissioner Jim Adkins, who successfully pushed back the effective date to August, acknowledged he hoped the board would reconsider a revised (translation: less expensive) version in the meantime. His stalling tactics and kowtowing to the politically influential building industry must cease. By delaying the start date, Adkins extended an impact fee moratorium that will cost the county additional dollars for infrastructure.

Adkins wasn't alone in his short-sightedness. Commissioner Wayne Dukes said "hopefully" the school district would proceed with its own impact fee study to join the county and he called a provision of the new ordinance — automatically lowering the fire fee \$75 when the county and Spring Hill departments merge — "outstanding." Despite that stated hope and praise, Dukes withdrew his second to the ordinance and then voted against it. He and Commissioner Nick Nicholson later reversed their "no" votes after Adkins pushed back the effective date and suggested a fine-tuned version of the ordinance could be forthcoming.

There should be no revision to this new ordinance. The status quo of zero impact fee continues for seven more months. And, even after the new charges begin, some pending projects will have up to another year to obtain building permits without paying an impact fee. It's a generous concession to builders and commercial developers that goes publicly unappreciated by an industry seeking even cheaper fees.

Only Commissioners David Russell and Diane Rowden did not equivocate in their support for new impact fees. They get it. Failing to collect the fees puts the rest of the tax-paying public on the hook for a greater share of future construction costs for roads, public safety equipment and other demands from growth. That unfair cost shift particularly penalizes pre-2009 new home buyers who ponied up their impact fee payments without hesitation. Their interests shouldn't take a back seat to a special interest.