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COUNTY COMMISSION

Impact Fee Increase Approved But panel members say they'll lower it if expected property tax hike passes.

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BARTOW -- Polk County commissioners Wednesday voted to increase the county's road and transportation impact fee by 175 percent. But it may not stay that high for long.

Commissioners unanimously agreed to set the maximum rate suggested, \$7,447. But they said they will lower the fee if a proposed property tax increase is passed next month.

They did not say by how much.

The current county transportation impact fee for a single-family home is \$2,705. It is charged to new homes countywide to help cover the cost of growth.

The county's Impact Fee Advisory Committee voted unanimously in July to recommend the large increase.

Wednesday's vote came in the midst of a controversial push to increase impact fees and property taxes in order to improve public services and facilities, such as roads, schools and libraries.

The centerpiece of that effort is a countywide property tax increase of \$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value, with the money going to road improvements. For a \$100,000 home with a \$25,000 homestead exemption, that would mean an additional \$75 a year in property tax.

Additional property tax increases are planned for residents outside the county's cities.

Commissioners, with the exception of Randy Wilkinson, PLEASE SEE FEE, PAGE B3

already have voted to approve the tax increases in principle. A final vote will be held in September as part of the final budget vote.

Though the impact fee committee recommended the new fee approved Wednesday, it also suggested a lower fee of \$5,218 if the tax package survives. That way, builders of new homes wouldn't have as intense a double-whammy of taxes and fees.

However, once the commission sets an impact fee, it can't raise it again for the coming year.

So if the tax increase doesn't pass, the county would end up with less money to spend on roads if it adopted the lower rate, which commissioners rejected. Commissioners said they would reduce the fee if the tax package is approved. But they did not say by how much.

Wednesday's vote should not be considered a predictor of what may happen when commissioners vote on the tax increase in September, said Commissioner Paul Senft.

"We're supposed to go into (the budget hearing) with an open mind and not having any decisions already made. I want to make sure we're in that position when we go there," he said. "I don't want to prejudice our decision."

The higher fee had been recommended by the Polk County Impact Fee Advisory Committee, but the committee also had suggested the county adopt the lower fee if it adopted the property tax.

The impact fee includes allowances for both county and state roads, dedicating \$3,510 for county roads and \$3,937 for state roads.

"Our decision was to view this as a transportation system and not just as a county road system. We could then use impact fees to

spend on state roads," said County Manager Mike Herr, explaining the county's rationale for including state roads in the impact fee.

The higher fee was opposed by the Polk County Builders Association, which objected to paying for state roads.

The group suggested a fee of \$5,479, which would pay for 50 percent of state roads, but commissioners chose not to act on the idea.

The new fee will go into effect Oct. 1.

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