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Commissioners hear impact fee debate

BY PAM BRANNON Gulf Breeze News
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care and Santa Rosa County are about \$100,000 apart on what they each believe should be a fair impact fee for the new building in Navarre. After working back and forth for "about a year," according to the consulting engineer for Baptist, they came last week to the county commission for "some direction." They left saying they were not sure they had any new direction, but did have more time for appeal.

Baptist Healthcare is building a 24,000 sq. ft. addition to its medical park in Navarre. The building stands behind the clinic already operating on Hwy. 98, east of Navarre Bridge.

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Asst. Planning Director for the county, Bill Dubois, told commissioners that the difference in opinion over the impact fees is because of a different manner of calculation. He said the county figures the fees based on new employees using the roads to get to work, as well as possible new patients, or customers, at a facility, and parking spots being built.

Baptist's consulting engineer Don Jehle said their calculations, which come from a different formula used at their headquarters in Ft. Smith, Ark., look at number of new employees. And since this is not a new facility, but an expansion of one already in operation, they do not believe the impact will be as great to Hwy. 98 and surrounding areas as the county's formula shows.

Director for Baptist Healthcare's Navarre facility, Nicole Brooker, told the board, "We are expanding the campus there, but our goal is not to create a standalone building. It is to give breathing room to people already working in the first building, like physical therapy. To give them some elbow room. Of course, we will attract new patients, but the new building is actually for some relocation of services, and to serve better the patients we already have."



Goodin

County Commissioner Gordon Goodin said, "In these kind of cases, where it is not a brand new facility and new business, but an expansion of an existing facility, I wonder if they might not actually be helping our impact on the roads and community. Instead of people being sent from the original building, down to Tiger Point or Gulf Breeze for services, they can be served right there, across the parking lot. I think maybe we should look at a different kind of way of figuring out impact fees for this kind of facility."

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Stewart

Goodin asked Dubois if the county staff was willing to look at a different kind of formula for this kind of building, or is it the county's policy to say "our way or the highway." County Attorney Thomas Dannheisser said

there was a form and the ordinance variation for appeal, that is why it has been going back and forth for a year.

Engineer Jehle said he and his organization just needed some direction as to where to go from here. "We have been going back and forth for a year, and Baptist is paying on the original impact fee calculated by the county on an annual basis. We just wonder if we are at an impasse, since we are still so far apart. Or if commissioners have any ideas on how to break the impasse. What we wondered was if we could wait until the building actually opened to see what traffic numbers were, and then submit that research."

But commissioners did not like that option. Commissioner John Broxson of Gulf Breeze said, "If we start doing that, we will open a can of worms that will never get closed. Every business will want to do that."

County Chair Tom Stewart said Baptist should keep working with the staff on its appeal. "But I think the direction you need to progress with is to try to show the staff are you actually expanding more service customers, and if so how many and how soon. Or are you expanding the ability to meet the needs of the customers you already have."

Commissioner Goodin said, "For facilities like this, I think we should also be taking into consideration which came first - the chicken or the egg. Would people like these even be willing to build a facility like this if the impact wasn't already there - and are they really adding any impact to the



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community and roads." He said it might be worth looking at as a new formula process for facilities like this one in the county.