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Last-minute effort aims to detour fees

Welton Cadwell wants a citizens task force to seek alternatives to raising road charges.

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TAVARES

Lake County Commission Chairman Welton Cadwell said Monday that an "economic perfect storm" isn't the right time to raise road-impact fees, and today he will propose creating a citizens task force to find other ways to pay for new or improved roads needed because of growth.

After months of wrangling over a plan to rake in money from new development, commissioners tonight are expected to consider boosting rates to some of the state's highest -- a 421 percent increase alone for most single-family homes.

Cadwell said he plans to vote against any increase and wants commissioners to go for his plan to appoint a task force, as the county's homebuilding industry continues a tailspin.

"We have the responsibility of providing a transportation network that cannot be ignored," Cadwell wrote in a proposal to other commissioners. "At the same time, we have responsibilities to the economic health of our County. I have always supported impact fees as a tool to help partially fund some of our needs, but today, I believe that moving forward with the current proposal would be a mistake."

One option in the county-endorsed study would increase road-impact fees for most single-family homes from \$2,189 to \$11,396. Businesses such as drive-through restaurants could see the most extreme jumps, from \$17,706 to \$147,231.

Instead of such huge fee increases, road projects might be funded through a "combination of sources," Cadwell said.

Cadwell said his decision wasn't influenced by lobbying from homebuilding and business interests. But his stand is likely good news for groups that have rallied against large increases, which they argue would scare away new business, make it harder for people to buy homes and result in thousands of jobs lost.



At least one opponent of skyrocketing fees made a last-minute effort Monday to make a case to commissioners. While commissioners sifted through the latest piles of impact-fee mail Monday, a business leader waited for an audience with elected officials.

Chamber Alliance of Lake County president Robert Johnson, whose group represents eight chambers and about 3,500 businesses countywide, called impact fees "one of the biggest issues this year for the county."

Johnson's group last week asked commissioners to delay any decisions until they can further prove a need for the huge increase. They also pushed the county to come up with more diverse economic-development strategies, which Cadwell expects to be completed in about six months.

Other groups -- such as the Home Builders Association of Lake County and the business Council of 100 -- have challenged the county's road-impact fee study, charging that it overestimates the cost of construction and suggests inflated rates.

As the home builders did last month, the Lake County League of Cities has asked commissioners for time to review the county's study and comment.

Commissioner Elaine Renick, who was elected last year on a slow-growth platform, said Monday she would consider granting that request.

"Everybody is anxious for a decision," Renick said. "I'm not rolling back impact fees -- but we've got to look at the numbers."

Meanwhile, a political-action committee has kept up its campaign against new increases and for the repealing of rates raised in 2004. Citizens for Better Government, led by Ro-Mac Lumber & Supply vice president Don Magruder, argues the fees are forcing prospective companies to look elsewhere and creating an even higher cost of housing that would make Lake more "family unfriendly" and unaffordable.

Full-page newspaper advertisements taken out by the Greater Lake County Association of Realtors urged opposition to the increases with a cartoon of a wolf and the plea: "Don't let them huff, puff & blow our county down!!"

"They're entertaining," said Commissioner Linda Stewart, who also won last year on a slow-growth agenda.

"The answer is somewhere in the middle," she said, adding that the opposition hasn't influenced her.

Stewart said not everyone is against the proposal.

"I got a phone call this morning [from someone] who said, 'Stick to your guns,' " referring to her campaign.

Among those with a personal interest in the outcome tonight is Kathryn Sutherin, owner of Collina Kids Academy in south Lake County. Sutherin is in discussions with South Lake Hospital to open another day-care center for hospital employees' children.

But the proposed road-impact fees are almost five times higher than what she paid last year -- \$63,370 --

to open Collina Kids.

Combined, Clermont's impact fees and the county's impact fees could cost \$500,000 -- 25 percent of her budget to build and furnish a new center, she said.

"It sounds like the more essential the service, the higher the [proposed] fee," Sutherin said. "They assume that we'll pay because we need to be here."

For Sutherin, it could be cheaper to move the day care five miles east into Oakland, in Orange County, where she would pay about \$200,000 less in road-impact fees.

Whatever happens tonight, another impact-fee battle could be waiting. As early as next month, county commissioners could consider raising school-impact fees tacked onto most new homes to help build classrooms in Lake.

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