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Supervisors lower traffic impact fees

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

Board, public say fees still far from perfect

A divided group of supervisors voted Wednesday to slash traffic impact fees by up to 40 percent for commercial developers, even though supporters and opponents alike said the cuts didn't go far enough.

Before voting 3-2 to cut the fees, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors listened to stories ranging from near-\$1 million fees scaring away a proposed Taco Bell and developers saying they'd done expensive road improvements without credit.

Supervisors Dianne Jacob, Pam Slater-Price and board Chairman Greg Cox voted for the cuts, saying they hoped that the lowered fees would encourage commercial development. Voting against were Supervisors Ron Roberts, who said the fees should be eliminated, and Bill Horn, who said the cuts were flawed and needed more study.

Roberts excoriated the fees, saying they were driving off developments that pay taxes -- as he and opponents predicted in 2005.

"All we did was stop building," he said. "We didn't improve the roads. We didn't reduce vehicle miles traveled. We're not providing services, we're not providing job opportunities. Other than that, we've got a great fee. ... This thing still needs an overhaul."

Horn said the fees were still higher than they should be in part because they require the county to build road improvements with crews that are paid union "prevailing wage" rates.

Even though the board approved the fee cuts Wednesday, they will not go into effect until April 8, county officials said.

When that happens, fees to build strip malls, shopping centers, fast-food restaurants, offices, industrial projects and other development could be slashed by up to 40 percent, officials said.

Fees to build homes could decrease by up to 28 percent, or increase by up to 3.5 percent in some parts of the county.

Jacob asked county managers to reconsider the fees in November because of continued complaints that they were driving away commercial development.

The fees that supervisors approved in 2005 were designed to stick developers with a bill for \$1.05 billion over the next 30 years to ensure that county roads and State Routes 67 and 76 could handle the traffic their commercial and residential projects would generate.

Rich Crompton said Wednesday that managers came up with the reduced fee amounts by shaving \$228 million off that \$1.05 billion figure.

Speakers at Wednesday's meeting told supervisors that they either knew of businesses that had been driven off by the fees, or that their projects would still be hurt by the reduced fees.

Ron Pennock of the East County Construction Council said that developers of a proposed Taco Bell franchise in Lakeside backed out after they were told its fee would be \$825,000.

"They said not only would they not build there, they wouldn't build anywhere in the county," Pennock said.

Steve Flynn, president of a group that wants to build an 85,000-square-foot shopping center in Valley Center that would include the community's first supermarket, said even the reduced fees were unfair to his project.

Flynn argued that the shopping center would decrease traffic because Valley Center residents would not have to travel to Escondido to shop. He said the project and others like it should not be charged any traffic fee.

"I would think that this is the kind of smart growth that the county would be looking to encourage," he said.

Another developer said he had done \$800,000 worth of road improvements in front of his business, but the new fees would not refund any of that investment.

Jacob, who made the motion to approve the fee cuts, directed county managers to continue to look for ways to reduce the fees further. She said county managers should create an oversight committee to help manage how the fees are spent to improve roads, and that county managers should consider letting developers continue to negotiate fee discounts if they do road work themselves.

However, the latter suggestion could actually increase the fees.

County engineers said they were able to lower the fees because they estimated those potential road improvements in advance and subtracted them from what they were charging developers.

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