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Horry council divided on impact fees issue

By Mike Cherney
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Horry County Council sent a mixed message on impact fees at its meeting Tuesday, giving an initial nod to the fees in one vote but declining to authorize a state-required impact fee study.

The council also voted to allow a race track near North Myrtle Beach to reopen, granted final approval to a new casino boat tax that would help fund The Coast Regional Transportation Authority and lifted a winter ban on golf carts on the beach.

The council passed first reading of an ordinance 7-4 that would create impact fees in the county. But the fee amounts listed in the ordinance, such as \$757 per home, were based on a 2001 report by TischlerBise, a consulting firm.

State law requires that the report include current data. Immediately after the first vote, the county decided against paying \$101,000 to get the report updated by TischlerBise.

Impact fees are costs charged to developers that would pay for improvements to public infrastructure. They would make new homes slightly more expensive.

"They sent me here to hold taxes down low and see to it that people can build houses at a reasonable price," said Councilman Paul Prince, who voted against the impact fees, of his constituents.

County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland said she felt the state law that enables local governments to pass impact fees was unfair. Under the law, each home would be assessed the same impact fee regardless of the price.

Gilland voted for the impact fee ordinance, saying the county needed to pay for new services, but voted against updating the study. The 2001 study cost the county \$75,000, but no impact fee was created.

"We paid \$75,000 and then we didn't use it and the money was wasted," Gilland said. "I don't want to waste \$101,000 until I'm sure the majority of the council wants to pass an impact fee."

Prince and Councilmen Brent Schulz, Bob Grabowski and James Frazier voted against the impact fee ordinance. Those four and Councilman Carl Schwarzkopf voted against updating the study.

The council also voted to allow the North Myrtle Beach Dragstrip, which has an eighth of a mile track for racing motorcycles and cars, to reopen. The dragstrip owners and the county agreed to 36 day-long events, and a few special events, per year at the track, with hours from noon to 9 p.m.

The track, owned by the Livingston family for more than 20 years, was shut down by the county in 2006 after a company that had leased the track made modifications without the proper permits.

John Weaver, the county attorney, said the track owners would withdraw a lawsuit against the county if the council let the track reopen.

George Livingston, one of the owners, said there were never any problems at the track beforehand and the company that had made the modifications is no longer managing the facility.

Livingston said his family first came to the area as slaves in the 1820s, and that he was born in a house near the track. The council chamber was mostly filled with supporters of the track, although a few nearby residents were against it.

"We've been living on this property for over 100 years, and we have been good neighbors to those folks who came here," he said.

"The problem here is the folks that are coming here want to put us out."

Bubba Rabon said he bought an 82-acre parcel adjacent to the track for \$3.5 million and was hoping to build more than 170 homes.

But he said he never would have bought the property had he known the race track was going to reopen, citing noise and traffic.

"I've lived here all my life, too," Rabon told the council. "I've got a lot of money invested in the property that I've got there."

Also Tuesday, the council gave final approval to a new casino boat tax that would give The Coast RTA \$400,000. The boat operators had challenged the original tax in court, so the tax was not being collected. The tax has since been renegotiated.

Last week, The Coast RTA's board of directors voted to restore routes that were cut last year due to the budget shortfall if the new casino boat tax was granted final approval on Tuesday night.

The council also granted final approval to allowing golf carts on the beach during the winter. Golf cart carts can now be driven on beaches in unincorporated Horry County between Nov. 1 and the end of February.

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