

Feeling the Impact

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A Milton development almost came to a complete halt on Monday, but now appears to be two weeks away from opening.

Monday, Cassandra Sharp almost had to pull the plug on her antique mall she has been working on going into the former Milton Post Office all because of her impact fee.

“The contractor went down to get his building permit to do the work inside and they said they couldn’t until he paid the impact fee,’ said Sharp. “When I got the call and how much the fee was I thought we were closed before we even opened.”

The impact fee Sharp was facing to reopen the old post office was \$33,000 as it was classified as general retail under 100,000 square feet.

After a phone call to Randy Jorgensen, the City of Milton Planning and Zoning Officer, and a meeting with Santa Rosa County Officials, the new calculations reduced her bill to \$2,500 and work is back on track.

But to Sharp, who is working on other properties besides the Old Post Office in Milton, fees like this could be a hindrance.

“I wasn’t expecting an impact fee, but I paid it in protest” said Sharp. “This is the historic post office and it had a lot of traffic back when it was open with all the people mailing packages, and the downstairs with civil service and the Department of Agriculture.

“At first this was a shocker, but the city went to bat for me and the county was very workable.”

It also got Milton Councilman Grady Hester upset at Tuesday’s meeting.

“I don’t know why they are having to pay an impact fee in the City of Milton,” said Hester. “We don’t see any of those dollars.”

Mayor Guy Thompson agreed when he questioned when was the last time the county paved a city street.

It's position was so strong, the city agreed to sign a letter and send it to the Santa Rosa County Commission, who will be conducting a workshop on Tuesday regarding possible changes necessary to the impact fee ordinance.

With the possible impact fees people could incur at the current structure, developers like Sharp who are working with historic buildings like the old post office could become quite leery.

"These expenses incurred to restore a historic building to its former self, while also meeting the current codes can be quite costly itself," said Sharp. "We added more air conditioning to the building and put in an ADA compliant bathroom.

"These things don't sound like much, but when you make changes you want to keep the feel of the period and to make it all work it takes a little creativity, which can get expensive."

Sharp is also worried now about what her impact fee might be on another project she has planned for Broad Street in Milton.

"When all this came about I asked them what my impact fee for that project would be and they didn't give me an answer," said Sharp. "They have had the plans before the first of the year and we hope to know something soon."

She is concerned since the project is already over budget due to other factors and keeping the historic feel of the old five and dime.

If Sharp understands the current ordinance correctly she will be charged \$6,600 per 1,000 square feet on the second project, while a church would be charged around \$809 per 1,000 square feet.

"I would love to be able to draw the crowds they are projecting me to draw or that a church would draw on Sunday," said Sharp. "If it were up to me I would like to see them bring the sales tax back up for roads so then everyone would pay their part."

Even Jorgenson himself noted that impact fees aren't as hard and steadfast as they are being applied here, elsewhere.

"In most cases when you have a place that is in need of development or a community redevelopment area they are not subject to an impact fee," said Jorgenson. "We are not talking about the changing of a footprint and we are not talking about the loss of green space either."

Concerns about reusing existing buildings has been one of the topics raised by Santa Rosa County Commissioners. The public workshop to discuss this issue is set for 9 a.m. Tuesday at the Commission Offices.