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## About-face on impact fees

A Times Editorial

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A spokesman for the Hernando Builders Association stood before the County Commission Tuesday and said something extraordinary.

"We are for increasing impact fees to the highest level the law allows," said Bob Eaton, owner of Artistic Homes and chairman of the association's government affairs committee.

If only the builders had taken that stance 15 years ago, instead of opposing every increase that has been proposed up until now, perhaps the need to update the county's infrastructure would not be so critical today.

Still, it is better to come around to the right way of thinking late rather than never, and residents of Hernando County should be pleased to see that conciliatory change of heart.

Impact fees are one-time charges on new construction that are used to offset the increased demand on fundamental services. In Hernando County, the money is used to improve roads, build schools, parks, libraries and government buildings, and enhance fire, police and ambulance services. The fees can be used only for those purposes and must be spent within six years of when they are collected.

A person who builds a single-family home is now charged \$4,798 for the added impact to those infrastructure needs. The fee is a little less for multifamily housing. The County Commission's planners have recommended raising that assessment to \$10,042. If adopted, it would bring in more than \$30-million a year. That estimate is extremely conservative because it is based only on the number of homes that were built last year, not the thousands upon thousands in the pipeline for approval in the next few years.

On Tuesday night the commission held the first of two required public hearings to discuss the proposed increase in impact fees. At the request of the builders, the Association of Realtors and the Greater Hernando Chamber of Commerce, the commissioners agreed unanimously to delay a second public hearing until June 2 so that a consultant hired by the builders can have more time to review the data and calculations county planners used to arrive at their recommendation.

The commission's decision to postpone the hearing was generous, inasmuch the consultant's intent is to find flaws in the county's proposal that could result in lowering the recommended impact fee increase. The delay also was not popular with most of the residents who attended the hearing Tuesday and urged the commission to raise fees to the maximum as soon as possible.

However, the commission's cooperation puts the onus on the builders to live up to their promise to work collaboratively and quickly with county planners to verify the data and computations.

Once that is done, the commission should waste no time setting a schedule for enacting an ordinance with higher fees, and with provisions that address the anticipated blitz by some developers and landowners to prepay the impact fees at the existing lower rate.

The county staff and commission have moved methodically - some say slowly because impact fees haven't been raised since 2001 - to this point. The builders have known it was coming and now, with slight hesitation, they appear poised to accept what is needed and inevitable. The time has come for the commission to wield this valuable growth management tool deliberately and promptly for the good of all county residents.

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