



02/19/06

Area builders' group hopes to influence impact-fee debate

Charlotte County's builders and construction-related businesses have been relatively quiet during recent debate about how -- not if -- the county should raise impact fees on new development.

However, the trade association that represents 675 area builders has been working behind the scenes to influence county commissioners in how and when revised fees should be assessed.

"The Charlotte-DeSoto Building Industry Association has taken no position on the current draft of the impact fees," association President Suzanne T. Graham said Tuesday.

Graham said the association has been working with a coalition of business and community leaders as part of the county's Office of Economic Development's Enterprise Charlotte Impact Fee Task Force.

If possible, she said, the Charlotte-DeSoto association would like to diffuse the focus on impact fees as a primary means of financing new development.

"The impact that impact fees are designed to address are not caused by new houses or other commercial buildings any more than they are caused by automobiles," Graham said. "The impact is caused by people. Charging the fees on the house or building is simply a convenience."

On Tuesday, Enterprise Charlotte Impact Fee Task Force member Larry Sandles, a veteran Punta Gorda builder, said commissioners should include more sales taxes, property taxes and transfer fees, increased assessment revenues and bonds to offset development costs rather than rely on impact fees.

The task force also supports capping impact fees at 3 percent of a new home's building cost and wants new fees to go into effect six months after adopted. The task force suggested that builders get five years to pay the fees without interest.

Most of the suggestions were dismissed by commissioners, who tentatively favor a 90-day implementation deadline and a pay-with-interest approach.

Commissioners also appear to support assessing new homes \$3.96 a square foot rather than adopting a unit levy that would raise fees 235 percent, from \$2,642 to \$8,838 per home, and using a "weighted index" that includes land costs to update fees annually.

But nothing is set in stone, although commissioners are scheduled to adopt the revised fees at a Feb. 28 public hearing.

Graham said while the Charlotte-DeSoto builders association hasn't overtly stated that it is opposed to the revised fees, its restrained approach doesn't imply support either.

"It has been a traditional reaction of homebuilder associations to speak out against impact fees that single out a specific industry when it is a problem shared by an entire community," she said.

The Charlotte-DeSoto group's local predecessor, the Charlotte Builders & Contractors Association, was publicly opposed to raising impact fees.


Former Charlotte Builders & Contractors Association President Russell Garrod was an outspoken critic of the proposal, and suggested commissioners adopt recommendations cited in a National Association of Home Builders' study of Charlotte County.

The study says new growth pays for itself through increased sales taxes, property taxes and an expanded economy.

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