

Bonita council, chamber hash out plans to draw new businesses

By TARA E. McLAUGHLIN

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Bring us your big-wigs, your techies and your tree-huggers.

This will be the ultimate goal of today's Bonita Springs City Council and Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce workshop to draw targeted businesses, such as corporate headquarters, aviation, Internet technologies and eco-tourism.

City officials will consider, at the request of business leaders, an ordinance for certain impact fee waivers, a resolution to focus on targeted businesses, expedited permit review and an economic development office.

"Nothing is going to change in the next two years if we don't do something to incentivize people coming to Bonita and moving into vacant space," said Andrew DeSalvo, who heads the chamber's economic development committee.

Bonita has hundreds of thousands of square feet of vacant office, retail and industrial space.

DeSalvo said about 14 percent of retail, 14 percent of industrial and 16 percent of office space is vacant. And it's projected to get worse, jumping another 4 percent to 6 percent in each category over the next two years.

At its next meeting, council will consider a resolution to establish a list of targeted industries that could qualify for state and county funding: Internet technology, life sciences, aviation, corporate headquarters, back office and green manufacturing and technology.

Following this, staff will prepare a draft ordinance to implement a two-year change-of-use impact fee waiver program.

When a new business opens in an existing building, if the use is more intense, generates more traffic, it is charged fees for the increased impact to the area.

Collier County implemented a similar program last year and 40 businesses saved more than a million dollars in fees.

While Councilwoman Janet Martin supported the idea, she expressed caution about forgoing revenue in light of the strained city budget.

"I'm concerned given the possible ramifications," Martin said, ... "given the information we just received."

Bonita Springs' estimated property values, announced Tuesday, fell 15.5 percent, or \$1.3 billion.

"I'd be more comfortable to reconsider it in one year," she said.

The ordinance would be open for discussion during public hearing, which could outline possible drawbacks of such a program, said Councilman John Spear.

Some business owners in Collier County told commissioners that the program penalized their business because it didn't fall within the county's parameters, such as only applying to buildings built in the five years before the program began.

Still, Spear was supportive of the idea.

"What the hell are we afraid of?" Spear asked. "Are we afraid of this being wildly successful? Are we afraid of our space filling up? Are we afraid of our economy recovering? Our only real risk is to be too timid here, not being too bold."

Details still to be worked out include whether or not the waiver would actually be more like a fee deferral and whether any changes would remain with the property or expire if a business moves.

The ordinance will be scheduled for June 16 and a public hearing July 7.

The city will also consider ways to make the permitting process move more quickly and easily, though two other governments are also involved, Bonita Springs Utilities and the Bonita Springs Fire Control and Rescue District.

The chamber also asked council to consider establishing an economic development office.

However, council turned the request back on the chamber.

Mayor Ben Nelson asked the chamber president and chief executive officer, Christine Ross, to investigate the option further and consider possible limitations that could be placed on such an office if it were placed within the city, such as requirements under the open records laws.



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