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Builders want responsible growth

Association offers suggestions to commissioners

NORTH PORT -- Asking commissioners to raise impact fees 300 percent won't solve all of the city's road problems, said members of the North Port Contractors Association.

At last week's contractor's meeting, some commented on the meeting held by the Citizen's Alliance group, which drew more than 1,000 concerned residents regarding a proposed 300 percent tax increase in the Road and Drainage District.

"I don't think people were fully educated about what impact fees pay for when they were yelling for the commissioners to raise the fees," said Paul Morgan, chairman of the contractors Responsible Growth Committee. "Impact fees cannot fix existing roads but pay for new ones. The city also cannot arbitrarily raise impact fees without doing a study mandated by the state. The city is doing the study right now."

Morgan said city commissioners told builders to expect increases.

"It's not going to be a surprise to us," he said. "We know it's either that option or the fear of a moratorium which will help no one."

Member Chad Allen said he was concerned the residents at the alliance meeting did a lot of complaining and didn't offer many options.

"It seemed like a commission-bashing session," he said. "I can understand why residents are so upset with this proposed increase. I think we should band together and go to these commission meetings and become more educated on the process."

Few residents, builders or contractors attended the budget hearings last month. There are special meetings for the budget in August. This is when changes to the budget can be made by commissioners. There are budget hearings planned for September.

Contractors said they have attended meetings of the city's growth committee. In addition, the group submitted recommendations to help the city to not have to propose raising rates so heavily in the Road and Drainage District.

One idea included the city rethinking the "gift" of the abandoned lots from the December meeting with Sarasota County. The city will sell its portion of the lots to make a profit. However, members of the contractors association are wary about whether the money will help as predicted.

Other suggestions are for a higher road tax on improved lots versus vacant lots, issuance of bonds, a new construction impact fee increase and recoupment of impact fees from existing homes when resold. The group asked the city to consider establishing special taxing districts for specific areas in the city for services needed or wanted. The city could require developers to pay for infrastructure for new development.

"The city could enforce existing district regional impact agreements in developing areas for immediate payment," Morgan said, adding the city could order federal publications for funding infrastructure grants, incentives, gifting and endowments.

While the city has one grant writer, a new one would have to be added to specifically research these grants for the Road and Drainage District. This could result in the city receiving hundreds of dollars in federal money, Morgan said.

"Will the city collect the outstanding fees from the developers along Toledo Blade, Sumter and Price boulevards?" he asked. "Have the commissioners asked for a sharing of expenses of maintaining concurrency on our roads that are designated as evacuation routes?"

Morgan said the purpose of the association's growth committee is to support and align the organization with the city in a concentrated effort. This can help solve the issues of infrastructure and the impact on the well-being of the city's economy.

"We want to be armed with knowledge anytime we speak with commissioners or city representatives," he said. "We don't want the residents to think it's an us-against-them city we live in. (At the alliance meeting) some residents yelled for commissioners to take back the city from the contractors. We are not here to wreck North Port. We need to educate the public and work with commissioners to not slow growth. We want responsible growth. We are willing to pay our fair share to help the city grow reasonably."

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By ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

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