

Thursday, May 12, 2005

Builders: Yes to meeting, no to fees

By Erica Solvig
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LEBANON - What was planned as a peace summit between home builders and Warren County commissioners may turn into a showdown over impact fees.

Commissioners had pledged a Friday meeting would be a chance for developers, elected leaders and school officials to brainstorm ways to pay for the public costs of residential growth. Their hope for years has been to impose an impact fee as high as \$10,000 per new home to help pay for roads, parks and schools that growing communities demand.

But developers aren't going to budge from their anti-impact fee stance, says Jeff Wieland, president of the Home Builders Association of Greater Cincinnati. He says the only reason he and his colleagues agreed to join the committee was because commissioners said the topic was long-term planning - not impact fees.

"That's not going to be the subject as far as we're concerned," Wieland said. "We said yeah, we'll sit down. But that's not what we want to come out. We are against impact fees."

Like other costs of development, impact fees get passed along to buyers, builders say.

Therefore, any impact fee will likely raise the cost of homes here.

Currently, Ohio's counties don't have the legal authority to impose impact fees. However, State Rep. Michelle Schneider said draft legislation that would give them the power could be introduced later this month.

Commissioner Mike Kilburn said that even if developers oppose impact fees, changes are needed.

"People are taxed to death," Kilburn said. "The new growth has to pay its way."

IMPACT FEES

Impact fees would be charged to every new home. The fees would vary by community, though Warren County has hoped for as much as \$10,000 per home. If imposed, the costs of new homes likely would rise because the charge would get passed along to the buyer.

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Warren is the state's second-fastest-growing county, with census figures showing it added 30,790 residents between 2000 and 2004.

"The possibility exists that the legislature may never pass this legislation," Commissioner Pat South said. "(But) this group can look at voluntary impact fees and other creative solutions to pay for the infrastructure without overburdening the people who already live here."

Homebuilders have argued that Warren County wouldn't have problems keeping up with new residents if officials had heeded studies dating back to at least 1974 that recommended smart growth planning here.

"As a builder, what an impact fee is going to do is slow my business down," Wieland said. "But ultimately, it's getting passed on to the home buyer. And it's not fair to them."

Friday's meeting will be the first time the 15-member committee has discussed impact fees. The meeting starts at 2 p.m. in the county administration building in Lebanon.

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