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Update

WHAT'S NEW: Charlotte County impact fees -- taxes earmarked for infrastructure improvements -- are going to rise soon, county officials said.

THE STORY SO FAR: Charlotte's average impact fees are much lower than the state average and nearby Sarasota and Manatee counties. County officials say the fees need to rise to keep up with growth. Building industry representatives fear it will hurt the construction trade.

WHAT'S NEXT: The county is expecting a draft of its new impact fee structure before Christmas.

Charlotte may raise impact fees to fund growth

By PATRICK WHITTLE

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CHARLOTTE COUNTY -- After years of luring developers and home builders with swaths of buildable land and low taxes, Charlotte County's impact fees are going to increase, county officials said.

The county's impact fees -- taxes charged on new homes and businesses to help pay for growth -- are not enough to keep roads, schools and services in step with population growth, budget officer Ray Sandrock said Thursday.

Charlotte charges an average of \$2,510 for the impact on infrastructure of a new single-family home. That's about \$3,000 less than Sarasota County, \$9,000 less than Manatee and \$3,700 less than the state average.

It can't continue like that, and the proof is in the county's books, Sandrock said. Charlotte's road budget is operating at a deficit of more than \$100 million, he said.

Building industry representatives counter that the new fees will hurt the construction trade, drive up the cost of housing and worsen the county's affordable housing problem.

County officials expect a debate on the subject when Charlotte receives a proposed new impact fee structure from a University of Florida professor.

The study should arrive before Christmas, said Sandrock, who is positive it will recommend higher fees.

"It's to balance new developments with new services, not 'Let's slam the developers,'" he said. "Striking the balance is the key."

Charlotte hasn't significantly increased the impact fees for single family homes in more than 10 years, Sandrock said.

James Nicholas, the UF professor, declined to speculate what the new fee could be, but said "everything would indicate that the impact fee would be going up."

Nicholas, who helped write some of Florida's first impact fee laws, is making recommendations about the county's fees for roads, libraries, parks, government facilities and public safety. He is expected to write another draft for a potential school impact fee in the future.

Charlotte, unlike more heavily developed Manatee and Sarasota counties, does not have a school impact fee.

Shannon Chesser, a former chief executive officer of the Charlotte Builders and Contractors Association, said higher fees might hurt the construction industry more than they improve infrastructure.

In a county where building is a big part of the economy, it could be unwise to heap new costs on home buyers, Chesser said.

"When you look around, what is the industry in Charlotte County?"

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