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County's impact fees may double

Questions about school enrollment and the effect of higher fees on affordable housing are debated.

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INVERNESS - County commissioners on Tuesday were moving toward doubling the amount of impact fees builders must pay: the final vote in what has been a contentious debate.

Among the factors at issue were school enrollment numbers and the unanimous desire to reduce the burden the fees could have on affordable housing. Finding a method that would give affordable housing builders a break, however, was not so easy. Commissioners had not decided on impact fees by press time.

Builders pay impact fees, which are supposed to defray the expenses that occupants of new buildings and homes put on county services such as libraries, roads, schools and public buildings.

Each of these four categories is assigned a fee. There are eight in all, and they are reviewed every three years to see if they need to increase because of modern infrastructure costs.

The county's consultant, Tindale-Oliver & Associates of Tampa, recommended increases Tuesday that would push the total from \$3,131 to \$6,465 per average home. Right now, impact fees raise about \$30-million over five years; with the increase, they would generate about \$40-million more for the county's infrastructure.

Proponents of an impact fee increase say growth "should pay its own way" and that current taxpayers should not be burdened with service expansion costs. They said impact fees are good for the economy because they build infrastructure.

Builders and real estate agents have complained that the recommended increase would put them out of business and drive their customers elsewhere. They said businesses won't relocate here and that the poor would be priced out of the housing market.

They have bought newspaper ads stating their case and have filled government meetings with members of

their industries. They have paid for two high-priced impact fee consultants to challenge the county consultant's study.

The most contentious part of the proposal they fought was the school fee, saying enrollment numbers, which are debatable, do not justify such a large proposed increase.

Last week, the county's consultant dropped the proposed school fee by \$179 per average new home. Impact fees are based on provable data, such as the U.S. Census and school enrollment numbers. A discrepancy was found.

The school fee dropped to \$1,861 from \$2,040. Even at that price, the county's consultant said, the fees would be among the middle to bottom half of many Florida counties.

Clark Stillwell, the Citrus County Builders Association attorney, shot back that 43 counties in the state don't have fees at all, meaning Citrus' proposal is higher than the consultant is saying. He warned commissioners that Sumter and Levy counties' low impact fees could draw away business from the building industry, which makes up 40 percent of Citrus' economy.

"You need to be conscious of what's around you," he told commissioners. "We do not want to be put at a competitive disadvantage."

Others also attacked the school fee. Government Solutions' Kirk Sorenson, a consultant hired by the builders, said the school district uses the maximum amount when estimating how much new school stations, which includes desks, cost them.

Avis Craig, development director of Citrus Hills, said the school system's population isn't growing like school officials say it is.

"The elementary school population is flat in this county," she said, "no matter how you slice it."

But school officials disagreed, saying student growth is obvious: Students are in mobile homes or "portables"; two new schools, worth \$19.5-million, are planned; and older schools are run down.

"Just look 11 miles down the road," School Board attorney Richard "Spike" Fitzpatrick said about Beverly Hills, a community that's growing younger daily.

Most residents supported higher impact fees, but many voiced concerns about the effect they could have on affordable housing.

Commissioner Gary Bartell proposed cutting the fee for affordable housing, and many commissioners were impressed by the idea. But they struggled to find where that money could be made up.

Other commissioners struggled with making builders of needed new doctor's offices pay high fees.

Some commissioners, such as Dennis Damato, weighed the type of impact the fees will have on small businesses looking to expand. But other commissioners said the fee increase is high now because they must make up for deficiencies that should have been taken care of years ago.

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