

City continues work on impact fees

By Mike Bowdoin

Seeking to get out in front of the wave of new construction that is expected to come to Chiefland in the near future, the City Commission moved forward with its plan to impose impact fees Monday night by voting to pay for the legal studies needed to justify the fees.

The Commission voted unanimously to hire the Government Services Group of Tallahassee - which did the legal work for the impact fees passed by Levy County last year - at a cost of \$38,937. The firm's study would create a basis for charging impact fees on new construction in the city, by showing the projected impact of new residents on the costs of maintaining the city's fire and police departments, recreational facilities and streets.

The Commission had also been considering paying for a formal review of the city's water and sewer development fee but City Manager Rodney Russ told commissioners that the Florida Rural Water Association in Tallahassee could perform the study at no cost.

"It is my recommendation that, obviously, we go with the freebies," Russ said, adding that the city's department heads had looked at their budgets at his request and found \$9,000 that could help pay for the studies.

There was some discussion of holding off on the studies until the next fiscal budget year begins in October, with Mayor Teresa Barron suggesting that the city could gather information for the studies beforehand so the work could begin immediately on Oct. 1.

However, Vice-Mayor Betty Walker took a strong position on the need for the Commission to go ahead and take action on the impact fee project, which has been on the table since last year.

"I don't think we need to pick this thing to death, we need to get it done," Walker said, noting that construction in the city isn't slowing down, and the price of the studies could rise by this fall.

City Commissioner Rollin Hudson pointed out that a delay could cause the city to miss out on six months of impact fees. Building Official Bill Hammond said a preliminary plat is currently being drawn on a 300-home subdivision in the city, and while all 300 homes would not be built at once construction on some homes there could begin fairly soon. City Commissioner Teal Pomeroy said the city would get a better return on its money by paying for the studies now.

When asked about how long it would take to complete the studies Russ said it would be about 90 days, and Hammond said the county's study had taken nearly six months, but the time frame would depend on how much information the city can provide for the firm.

Police Chief Robert Douglas weighed in and said he thought Vice-Mayor Walker was "right on."

"I think you have to bite the bullet and get it done," Douglas said, predicting that with new construction coming the fees will pay for the study.

Hudson then made a motion to hire the Government Services Group, which was seconded by City Commissioner Alice Monyei and passed with a 5-0 vote.

The Commission decided the money for the study would come out of a contingency fee if it is paid for in this year's budget, or it will be included in the budget process for next year.

A citizen in attendance, Eddie Barron, asked if the city had to do the studies. City Attorney Norm Fugate said case law in Florida has shown that the studies are needed to justify the fees in order to sustain a legal challenge, and the state legislature had passed a new bill this year requiring individual local studies for each government entity charging impact fees.

Other bids for the work considered by the Commission were a bid of \$112,158.25 by Tindale-Oliver and Associates for the entire project, and a bid of \$25,000 by Darabi and Associates for all of the studies except transportation.

The Government Services Group's bid was broken out into prices of \$7,012.50 each for the fire, police and recreation studies, and \$17,900 for the transportation impact fee study.

Last November the Levy County Commission voted to impose impact fees on new construction in the unincorporated areas of the county. Those fees, for roads, parks and emergency medical services, were said to total \$1,269.59 for a new single-family residence. The total for the city's proposed impact fees will not be known until the study is completed, as the recommended amount will be based on the results, with the Commission having the final say on setting the fees.