

Collier commissioners reduce school impact fees by 50 percent

By KELLY FARRELL

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NAPLES — Developers working in Collier County may soon build sizable savings as the Board of Collier County Commissioners considered continued decreases in impact fees Tuesday morning.

Collier County School District impact fees, which are collected by the county, are to decrease by about 50 percent, following a unanimous, 5-0, vote of the commission. Also, commissioners agreed to consider making a recent 32 percent reduction in transportation impact fees retroactive.

Lowering school impact fees was made possible due to a recent uptake in residential development, said Amy Patterson, county economic development manager. School impact fees are only due on residential construction and much of that increased activity is within planned developments, she said.

“This is telling us it’s far from bad out there,” said Commissioner Jim Coletta. “It’s the first time I’ve had anyone tell me that.”

School impact fees collected in 2010 neared the amounts collected in 2005, Patterson said. However, that’s a reflection of increased impact fee rates as well as an uptick in residential construction that has not yet been seen in commercial construction, she said.

The reduction is expected to decrease revenue to the school district by about \$3.75 million, reported Collier County School District operational officer Michele LaBute.

The Collier County School Board had unanimously recommended the rate cut in an August meeting.

An ongoing impact fee study may cause officials to change rates again next year, Patterson said.

Developers are seeking more relief from commissioners, requesting after-the-fact discounts on transportation impact fees.

Commissioners voted in late September to decrease transportation impact fees by 32 percent effective Oct. 8. However, there were requests for that discount to be applied to permit applications filed prior to Friday.

Naples attorney Bruce Anderson said he had two clients, including developer GL Homes, with permits already in the review process prior to the commission's vote to reduce the fees.

Anderson sought to get the reduced rate for his clients, who had yet to pick up their permits, he said. The savings equates to tens of thousands of dollars for each client, he said.

Currently, the county policy would allow people with pending permits to retract them and then reapply to have their impact fees recalculated. As long as the building plans don't change, such a reapplication would cost the applicant in the range of \$200 to \$1,000, depending on the scope of the project, and would take county officials about two weeks to review, said Nick Casalanguida, the county's growth administrator.

"That means a delay. It's that much longer people have to wait to get a job building these new homes," said Anderson, who said he believed the delay would actually be longer than two weeks.

Commissioner Frank Halas expressed skepticism that the same applicants would request to pay more when the economy recovers and impact fees are increased in the future.

"Would it work in reverse?" Halas asked rhetorically. "The door can't swing both ways."

Coletta suggested charging a recalculation fee and perhaps making it automatic rather than requesting applicants withdraw and then reapply with the same plans just to get the discount.

Currently under review are permit applications for 528,000 square feet of commercial space and 126 residential units subject to the old transportation impact fees, Casalanguida said. Recalculating those permit applications with the new 32 percent discount would lead to about \$1.9 million in savings for the applicants, he said.

"I'm concerned. We have commitments also in terms of debt services," Halas said.

Coletta made a motion to further discuss the proposal to adjust impact fees on permit applications filed before Oct. 8 and still pending approval. Commissioner Donna Fiala seconded the motion, which was approved 4-1, with Halas dissenting. The discussion is to be held at a future public meeting yet to be scheduled. Commissioners have said they anticipated a decrease in utility impact fees early next year, so a decision on the policy will likely have an effect on future impact fee changes as well.



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