

Commission candidates don't see eye to eye on impact fee moratorium

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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If there is one issue on which the candidates in each of the three Collier County commission primary races can agree to disagree, it's impact fees.

The challengers, all Republicans, have all said a moratorium on some or all of those fees could drive economic development to Collier County.

Current commissioners said while the idea might be worth exploring, there are hazards to a moratorium.

Impact fees are a charge on new development. They help fund and pay for the construction or needed expansion of things like roads to help reduce the economic burden of communities dealing with population growth.

District 3 commission candidate Bill McDaniel has spoken frequently about his desire for a moratorium on impact fees.

"I am interested in adjusting the way our community has been doing business," he said. "It has been shown that growth paying for growth programs in other municipalities have not worked."

McDaniel said he would like to implement a six-month moratorium on impact fees and analyze permits issued and the growth of the county's tax base to determine the effect. The productivity committee could also determine if a moratorium would benefit Collier, he said.

"Collier County is not a business friendly community," he said. "We need to own that, we've earned it. And we need to fix it."

McDaniel said the increase in the tax base will allow the county to collect a perpetual revenue stream without punishing businesses.

Commissioner Tom Henning, McDaniel's opponent, said the county shouldn't consider a moratorium on impact fees without looking at the \$68 million prepaid impact fees on land that has not been in development, which has also not been spent or dedicated to future capital projects.

"I believe we need to have public dialogue not only of impact fee rates, but other government impediments of job growth," he said. "We must take into consideration the

cost to the public in that we are not collecting fees and the effect on capital improvements, which are being delayed."

Henning said the county also has to take into consideration developers who have paid impact fees and have not built because of a lack of demand. An inventory of vacant commercial buildings should be taken before a final decision is made, he said.

"Making hasty decisions without looking at the cause and effect is not leadership," he said.

McDaniel points to Osceola County, which had a moratorium on transportation and fire impact fees on new commercial construction, which went into effect in December 2010. As of Jan. 1, 2012, the county has waived \$12.2 million in transportation impact fees for 35 projects, seen commercial building permits increase 110 percent and created about 1,300 construction-related jobs and 800 full or part-time jobs, according to Joe Johnston of the Osceola County Community Development Department.

Johnston said the moratorium has helped the county, especially when it comes to commercial development, which has run the gamut from a 300-room hotel to gas stations and convenience stores.

But Collier County also is seeing an increase in permitting without putting a moratorium on impact fees, said James French, director of operations for the county's Growth Management Department. According to French, the county is up 31 percent in residential permits between January and June 2012 from the same period in 2011. Commercial permitting also is up 136 percent for that same period.

District 1 Commissioner Donna Fiala said the county has several big developments, including Hacienda Lakes, moving forward with plans to develop with the county's current impact fees. While she supports lowering impact fees, she doesn't want to eliminate them.

"Without those impact fees, we would not have the money needed to support all of that development," she said. "What if we started a moratorium and those developers wanted a refund? Who would be stuck paying for the infrastructure? The taxpayers would."

Her challenger, Steve Cosgrove, said charging those fees might not be necessary.

"They would be necessary in a place where infrastructure was not keeping up with growth," he said. "We have great infrastructure, but the economy stinks."

Cosgrove said he would be interested in looking at a moratorium for impact fees and studying its effects.

District 5 commission candidate Tim Nance said Collier has traditionally had the highest impact fees in the state, even though the commissioners have lowered them. Nance advocates comparing Collier County with other counties to see if a moratorium or further lowering of the fees would bring business to Collier.

"We need to examine how we apply impact fees and whether we institute a moratorium as a means of getting people to invest in Collier County," he said. "We need to make sure Collier is a more business-friendly environment and look at some of these regulatory burdens."

District 5 commissioner Jim Coletta said the county has decreased impact fees by almost 40 percent in recent years. He believes they are at the necessary levels.

"They will allow for expansion — not deter growth- and cover the new growth," he said. "Some consider them to be on the high side, but they are fair for all."



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