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Committee hears options

Regional needs addressed by planning consultants

BY ROBERT SANDLER, *The Island Packet*

Published Saturday, August 27th, 2005

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As local governments look to raise hundreds of millions of dollars for road, park and school needs over the next 15 years, consultants are suggesting that regional planning be handled by regional boards to continually look at the entire area's needs.

Clarion Associates, a Denver-based group compiling the southern Beaufort County regional plan, is encouraging creation of a new southern Beaufort County transportation committee to prepare regional transportation plans. That group, the consultants say, should make recommendations for the regional road network -- including major routes on Hilton Head Island and greater Bluffton.

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Also, a work group should be established between the school district and local governments to discuss

planning for future school needs.

Those recommendations were presented by Clarion Associates at a meeting of the regional plan steering committee Friday at the Hilton Head Island library.

The consultants have identified about \$495 million in improvements to the road, park and school system that are needed today and will be needed as southern Beaufort County grows over the next 15 years. But governments only have mechanisms in place to collect about \$129 million for those needs.

To make up the shortfall, the consultants suggested the county immediately and drastically raise impact fees paid for the construction of new buildings.

Developers currently pay about \$440 for road improvements per single-family house and about \$483 for parks. The consultants suggest raising the road fee to at least \$1,600 and the park fee to about \$840. Those changes would raise about \$72 million for roads and \$10 million for parks.

Craig Richardson, one of the consultants, said the suggestion to raise the impact fee was "very reasonable" and would be more like a "fair-share fee."

Richardson also said county voters should approve a 1 percent capital improvements sales tax. County officials already have said they plan to put the question to voters at the next possible opportunity -- in November 2006. Similar referendums failed in 2002 and 2004.

Don Blair, chairman of the Bluffton Planning Commission who also sits on the regional plan's steering committee, said he was worried about creating a new regional committee that only would be part-time. Instead, he suggested that any new regional authority be given a full-time staff to continually examine southern Beaufort County's growth issues.

"This committee this morning is an example of how ineffectual a committee can be -- with less than 50 percent attendance," Blair said.

Eleven members of the steering committee missed Friday's meeting, including four of the panel's 10 voting members, according to committee vice chairman Alan Herd.

Hilton Head Island Mayor Pro Tem Ken Heitzke mentioned that even if all of the roads, parks and schools are built, the consultants' report doesn't look at how to pay for ongoing operational costs.

"All these costs probably are the tip of the iceberg," he said.

Richardson said ongoing operational and maintenance costs could equal the one-time construction costs, but his firm wasn't going into detail on that subject because it wasn't in its contract.

The steering committee faced a tough reception from several people who attended Friday's meeting.

Manny Peralta, who lives in Windmill Harbour, told the steering committee that the impact fees should be

raised even higher if they are to pay for the costs of all new development. To pay for the \$154 million of future road needs, it would take an impact fee of more than \$3,000 to offset the costs that will be generated by future development, Peralta said.

Chuck Henry, a resident of Daufuskie Island, told committee members that they were forgetting about how his island fits into the plan. The consultants and county planning officials responded that the plan only is supposed to consider issues that affect the entire region. County planners are working on separate programs for remote Daufuskie.

Among the consultants' other suggestions:

- Local governments should allow other neighboring jurisdictions to review plans for major development projects before approving them.
- The Lowcountry Regional Transportation Authority should pursue mainline bus service along U.S. 278 through greater Bluffton, including a transfer center somewhere in the area's western edge.
- Consider the possible consequences of the area becoming a metropolitan planning organization, a designation that could improve the region's chances of getting federal money.
- Add traffic cameras and message boards throughout the regional road network.

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