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From This Morning's Editions Of The News-press

Costs, growth fuel higher fees

Lee commissioners to consider fire, medical increases

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Originally posted on February 06, 2006

Proposed EMS impact fees

Many increases to Emergency Medical Services impact fees are also recommended. The county provides ambulance service to most of the county. Fort Myers Beach and the Lehigh Acres Fire Protection and Rescue District are not included. Here's a breakdown:

LAND USE	UNIT	CURRENT FEE	POTENTIAL FEE	PERCENT CHANGE
Single family detached*	Dwelling	\$30	\$44	47.0%
Multi-family	Dwelling	\$22	\$31	41.0%
Mobile home/3rd park	Space	\$22	\$30	36.0%
Manufactured	Space	\$27	\$32	19.0%
Hotel	2,000-sq. ft.	\$47	\$58	23.0%
Office	2,000-sq. ft.	\$47	\$66	41.0%
Public/institutional	2,000-sq. ft.	\$4	\$18	350.0%
Industrial	2,000-sq. ft.	\$4	\$14	250.0%
Warehouse	2,000-sq. ft.	\$4	\$7	75.0%

* Includes mobile home (manufactured dwelling) on individual lot.

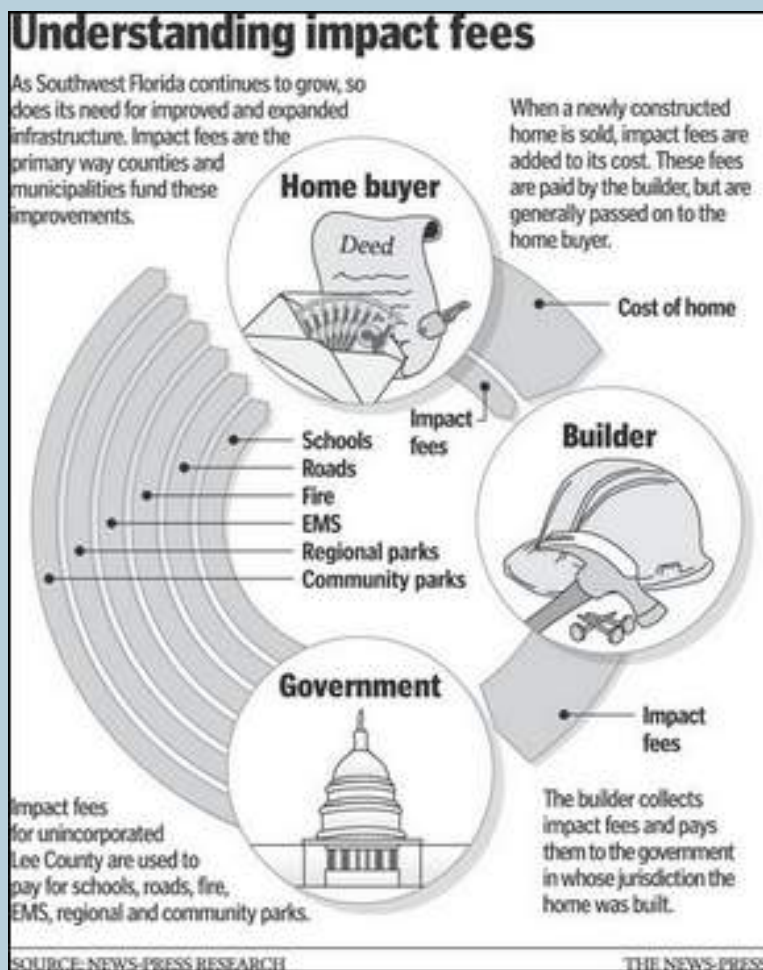
Two years ago, building a new fire station cost \$1 million. Today, one local fire chief said that same station would cost 2 1/2 times as much.

These higher costs, coupled with a record population boom, are why fire and emergency medical impact fees could go up by late March. Officials say the extra revenue can help assure tens of thousands of new residents that their homes will be protected from fire and their loved ones taken care of in times of medical emergency.

They are two of the smaller impact fees, so the recommended increases could total as little as \$20 or as much as \$350 more to buy a new home.

But the increases would further burden prospective homeowners who have already seen other taxes, such as school impact fees, go up by more than \$2,000. Every little bit hurts those shopping for a home.

Increases in all Lee impact fees are coming for two reasons: rapid population growth and rising building costs the past several years, said Mary Gibbs, director of community development. The county continues to re-evaluate all impact fees every three years to keep up with growth, said Commissioner Tammy Hall. "If growth continues the way it has been in the last few years we may have to look at every two years."



IF YOU GO

A recent study of Lee County's fire and EMS impact fees recommends significant increases to both. The study is available online at lee-county.com/dcd/pdfs/FireImpactFee.pdf. Here's the process it must go through before going to two public hearings.

- Executive Regulatory Oversight Committee, 2 p.m. Wednesday, East Room of the old courthouse in

Proposed Fire/Rescue Impact fees

A study is recommending increases to Lee Fire and Rescue impact fees. Lee County provides fire and rescue services to the county, while municipal fire departments or independent fire districts cover the remainder of the county. Those covered by municipal departments would pay an increase. Here's a breakdown of the fee increases recommended for a single-family home in each of the 11 fire districts.

FIRE DISTRICT	CURRENT FEE	PROPOSED FEE	PERCENT CHANGE
Alto	\$622	\$760	22%
Bonhams	\$622	\$760	22%
Bonita Springs	\$273	\$600	218%
Capitol	\$622	\$760	22%
Edgewater	\$495	\$600	21%
Fort Myers	\$394	\$490	23%
Fort Myers Beach	\$485	\$600	25%
Fort Myers Shores	\$365	\$760	108%
Irwin-Walton	\$387	\$475	23%
Lehigh Acres	\$368	\$445	21%
Lee County Airport	\$622	\$760	22%
Witchita-Fla Island	\$622	\$760	22%
North Fort Myers	\$387	\$307	8%
San Carlos Park	\$475	\$760	60%
Sanibel	\$335	\$478	43%
South Trail	\$398	\$480	21%
Tara	\$600	\$760	27%
Upper Capitol	\$622	\$760	22%

The fire and medical impact fee increases are not a done deal. The process of considering those increases started Wednesday and will continue into March with two public hearings before Lee County commissioners vote on it.

About 20,000 new residents moved to Lee County in 2004, and 28,000 in 2005. More fire stations and ambulances are needed to serve them. As building material and labor prices go up, it also costs more to build stations and the firetrucks and ambulances to put in them, Gibbs said.

For example, the San Carlos Park Fire District, which has three fire stations, is looking to build two more, said San Carlos District Chief Nat Ippolito. One is in the Three Oaks Parkway area where Chico's is locating and the area is developing quickly.

When San Carlos first considered a new station two years ago, building one was estimated to cost \$1 million. Now the same station would cost about \$2.5 million. Then to equip a substation with a rescue vehicle and firetruck would cost more than \$500,000. And that doesn't include staffing the station, which is not covered by impact fees.

"Impact fees are a necessary evil; no one wants to charge it, but if we don't, we're not going to have the services," Ippolito said. "If there were no more new residents then we wouldn't need it. We have to meet certain response times that's based on certain population criteria."

A study done by a consultant hired by the county is recommending upping EMS and fire/rescue impact fees, which were both last increased in January 2003. The county is on a schedule to update all impact fees every three years.

Building a new home here can now include as much as \$10,000 in impact fees.

Richard Durling, a home builder and developer who owns Marvin Development Corp., said that while building costs have gone up, he's still against increasing impact fees to compensate because it hurts consumers' ability

downtown Fort Myers, 2120 Main St.
 • Land Development Code Advisory Committee, 8 a. m. Friday, first floor conference room (1B) of the Public Works Building, 1500 Monroe St., downtown Fort Myers

• Local Planning Agency, 8:30 a.m. Feb. 27, Commission chambers, 2120 Main St.

• County Commission public hearings, 5:05 p.m. March 14 and 28, in Commission chambers

IMPACT FEE EXPLAINER

• Impact fees are one-time assessments paid on new construction. Builders typically pass on the extra cost to buyers of new homes or businesses through higher sales prices.

• Lee collects impact fees for schools, community and regional parks, roads, fire and emergency medical services.

• EMS is the lowest of the six impact fees, and fire is the third smallest.

• A total of \$467.96 million in impact fees has been collected in Lee County since their inception in 1989.

• More than half that total is from road impact fees alone, totaling \$250.94 million.

• Since 1989, about \$2.24 million in EMS impact fees has been collected, and about \$29.56 million from fire fees.

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to buy affordable housing. In turn, that cuts back the number of new homes he builds.

"For the building industry, again we are looking at the county commissioners and shaking our head and wondering why they can say in one breath, we have a crisis situation with what they call workforce housing and turn around in the next and raise fees again," Durling said.

"For us, it's just another setback for affordable housing and a setback for the average couple to make homeownership a reality," he said. "They have said the cost of labor and materials is up, and they do add up, but two wrongs don't make a right. They need to find other ways to fund infrastructure."

Lee EMS Chief Chris Hansen said putting more ambulances on the road is critical. Last year the EMS budget included \$11 million to build stations cooperatively with the sheriff's office and some fire districts to avoid redundant buildings. But with the population boom, several more are needed, Hansen said.

"We need to grow like every department is needing to grow," Hansen. "We are thankful to have the recommendation for an increase."

This year, EMS has approval to build another 24-hour ambulance station, two 12-hour stations and add a nontransport Advanced Life Support vehicle. EMS currently runs 27, 24-hour ambulances and three, 12-hour ambulances, along with two nontransport vehicles.

What does it cost to build a station? The Trailhead station, where work is about to begin on Veronica Shoemaker Boulevard, will be built jointly with Fort Myers. It will cost about \$2.1 million. Getting an ambulance to put in it will cost about \$165,000, including a \$25,000 heart monitor for each one.

The fee study, by Duncan Associates of Austin, Texas, recommends a 213 percent increase for emergency medical service impact fees on new single-family homes, and up to 77 percent increase to fire impact fees in some fire districts.

For example, the current EMS fee on a single-family home would go from \$30 to \$94. That would apply to all of Lee County except Fort Myers Beach and the Lehigh Acres Fire Protection and Rescue District.

With fire impact fees, the cost depends on which of the 18 fire districts the new construction is in. In Bonita Springs, it would rise from \$373 to \$660 for a single-family home, a 77 percent increase. On the other hand, if you're building in North Fort Myers, it could be as low as 7 percent.

Builders and affordable housing advocates have opposed impact fee increases in the past because it's not a progressive tax. For example, someone buying a new \$2 million home would pay the same impact fee as someone buying one for \$200,000. Hall said she understands the building industry's frustration, but believes it's the fairest way to pay for growth that has surfaced.

"It's not about the value of the home, it's about the actual impact," Hall said. "When a new home is built, there are still two cars that will come out on that road and additional people using county services. The only one (impact fee) that wouldn't hold true is for those who don't have a child in school that are paying school impact fees."

Hall said while she can't say how she would vote, she supports the logic behind the fees.

"The idea is to let growth pay for growth," Hall said. "The cost should be on the shoulders of those causing that growth to occur. We know our methodology stands up in court. At the same time, we want to make sure they are calculated appropriately and that they are fair. I do feel we have some of the lowest impact fees in South

Florida, but we are not trying to compete. We use a formula that we feel is fair and equitable."

The recommended increases come less than three months after school impact fees — one of the highest impact fees in the county — were roughly doubled, taking effect Jan. 1. For example, school fees on a new single-family home went from \$2,232 to \$4,309.

The study bases part of its recommendations on population projections by the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council that show Lee will continue adding about 10,000 new residents a year through 2020, before growth begins to taper off.

"There is every indication that the strong growth the county has experienced in recent years will continue," the study says. "Continuing strong growth in the county, both residential and nonresidential, will create growing demands for fire/rescue and EMS facilities and equipment."

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