

County explores Sandy Creek impact fee plan

[FELICIA KITZMILLER / News Herald Writer](#)

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PANAMA CITY — Bay County has found money that could help alleviate burdensome impact fees for Sandy Creek residents, but not all the commissioners are ready to give it away.

Callaway's purchase of the beleaguered utility company saved customers from a massive rate hike, but still left them with a hefty bill. A three-bedroom, two-bathroom house will be assessed \$7,027 in impact fees by the city of Callaway. That is less than the original projection of \$7,690.

Commissioner Guy Tunnell said at Tuesday's County Commission meeting he has received continuous complaints from constituents about the fees. After working with assistant county manager Dan Shaw, Tunnell said \$500,000 in State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) grant money could be used to pay the impact fees of low-income residents. A family of four with a household income of less than \$46,000 would qualify to have their impact fees paid entirely, Tunnell said.

SHIP funds are awarded on a population-based formula to each county and to entitlement cities as an incentive to produce and preserve affordable housing. SHIP money typically is used for emergency housing repairs and rehabilitation of dwellings owned by low-income residents.

The grant money could fund the impact fees of about 70 residents, but Callaway leaders have said they would match any county contribution toward the impact fees up to \$175,000, which Tunnell said he hoped would be used to assist those not meeting the income requirements of the SHIP grant.

"We feel confident many of the homeowners out there are going to qualify," he said.

Tunnell's proposal, however, met resistance from commissioners Mike Thomas and George Gainer, who said the county has put more than its fair share of money toward the deal. Bay County contributed \$300,000 to the purchase of Sandy Creek and Bayside utilities by Callaway and Panama City Beach, respectively.

"I think we did pretty good coming up with \$150,000 for the sale, and that's all we're doing for" Bayside customers, Thomas said.

Thomas noted the county also forgave Utilities Inc. for \$219,000 in unpaid regulatory fees to help close the deal.

"We went above and beyond what we were expected to do," Gainer said.

Tunnell said he understands the other commissioners' concerns, but he is frustrated Sandy Creek residents are facing such high impact fees, when Bayside customers will have none. He also said Callaway dangling the money and saying they would only help lower the impact fees if Bay County

contributed too as a challenge.

"I thought this was a great way to call their bluff," he said.

Commissioners did not take a vote on the allocation of the grant money at Tuesday's meeting and instead directed staff to come back with more information at the next meeting.

An earlier version of this story is posted below:

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