

The News Sun

County to continue impact fee hiatus

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SEBRING -- Highlands County Commissioners voted 5-0 at their meeting Tuesday afternoon to continue the suspension of impact fees until June 30, 2011.

Commissioners originally voted to suspend the fees in June of 2009, and had to vote to extend the suspension before July 1.

"This is about survival," said Commissioner Guy Maxcy. "I am not for getting rid of fees, but I am all for suspending these fees."

The public weighed in on reinstating the impact fees imposed on new development, but the majority of the groups supported the suspension.

"We could be only one county out of 67 going the other direction," said Highlands County Resident Chester Downing. "An impact fee is a tax. I am against reinstating the impact fee, and I am for abolishing it. Listen to the people."

John McClure, an attorney for the Highlands County School Board, also requested that the commission continue to suspend the impact fees.

"The impact fee is practically the only source for capital funding," McClure said. "But the school board voted to suspend the impact fees for another year."

"I recommend an indefinite suspension of the impact fees," said resident Steve Fruit.

Chief Operating Officer for Highlands County Habitat for Humanity stated that impact fees would cripple an upcoming development.

"Reinstating the impact fees at this point would be a huge blow to providing affordable housing," Hawthorne said. "We have the largest upcoming development, and we would not be able to afford an increased fees."

"A resumption of impact fees would be a detriment to job creation," said Economic Development Chairman Ronnie Carter.

Marlene Barger, representing The Group for Better Government, also encouraged the commission to extend the moratorium on impact fees.

"Some citizens are now in a survival mode ... construction trade workers have sought work outside the county, creating negative growth," Barger said.

A few citizens encouraged the commission to reinstate the fees.

"I encourage you to reinstate the impact fee immediately," said resident John Drennen.

According to activist Bill Youngman, there are plenty of empty homes already built, and asked that the impact fees be put back in place to encourage residents to buy existing homes.

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