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County Panel Holds Town Hall Meeting

Residents complain about development and traffic, balk at officials' plans to raise taxes.

By [Diane Lacey Allen](#)

The Ledger

LAKELAND -- Polk County commissioners took their proposed tax-increase package on the road Tuesday night with a town hall meeting at Lake Gibson High School.

Residents complained about traffic and lamented the loss of groves to development, but they got a little testy when Commissioner Bob English tried to explain a plan that would increase property taxes for residents outside Polk's cities by \$2.25 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

"Why? Why? Why?" rang out from the crowd of about 200 people.

Some shouted "Stop the growth" and others "That's your problem, not ours."

But English held tough, calming the audience members by telling them that the only way taxes would ever decrease would be by improving the county's quality of life and attracting lucrative businesses.

"We have to invest in the county," English said. "We can't just let things go . . . Our county tax base is crumbling. Our county roads are crumbling . . ."

"We have to face up to investing in our county or we're going downhill. We can't use impact fees to pay for past failures."

The new tax proposal is just one of the methods commissioners will be considering this year. Higher impact fees will also be on the table soon, as will the possibility of the county's first stormwater utility fee.

In a mix of laments about cars speeding through neighborhoods, low water pressure and slow trash pickup, several residents scolded commissioners for not reining in what they considered to be runaway growth.

"Like most everybody here, as I was growing up there were orange groves (all around) . . . woods and bird hunting. Money isn't going to fix the problem," said Tom Johnson, 39.

Johnson encouraged the commissioners to "say no" the next time someone asked to put in another development.

He warned that if they didn't, the county risked losing its identity and said it might as well forget about the reason for the "natural resources" display the county had erected behind the podium.

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Still, the talk kept coming back to taxes. David Pontes, 56, was one of the most forceful opponents of the latest plan to solve a \$581.7 million shortfall.

He called the idea "political suicide."

"This should have have been voter-mandated, these taxes," Pontes said.

"I voted these people in there, and I'm going to vote them out," he said. "They've overstepped their boundaries. It's taxation without representation."

Diane Lacey Allen can be reached at diane.allen@theledger.com or 863-802-7514.



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