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County commission votes to triple impact fees

*BY JEFF SCHWEERS
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Brevard County Commissioners on Tuesday reluctantly agreed to triple what they charge new development in Rockledge and unincorporated Brevard to help pay for roads and a mounting list of growth-related construction projects.

The 4-1 vote comes as the county and cities struggle to fund a \$420 million shortfall in road revenue. Commissioner Jackie Colon cast the dissenting vote. She has long opposed impact fees as harmful to first-time and low-income homebuyers.

But the board's two other critics of impact fees -- Helen Voltz and Ron Pritchard -- cast their lot with the two commissioners who have long supported impact fees -- Sue Carlson and Truman Scarborough.

Raising the impact fee is the only way to get voters to support raising the sales tax by 1 cent in November to help raise \$350 million for road projects, Voltz said.

"I don't agree with impact fees, but I'm not going to stick my head in the sand," Voltz said.

Quoting Bob Dylan, Pritchard said, "The times, they are a'changing."

Passage of new state legislation requires counties to explore every option available to them for raising money for roads before they can receive state money.

"If we don't pay, we don't play," Pritchard said.

He's against raising the sales tax, gas tax and property taxes -- and as much as he doesn't like impact fees, he said it's the only option because it helps pay for growth-related infrastructure without affecting local taxpayers.

County staff members must come back with an ordinance for the board to adopt to enact the new fees. The ordinance must go before the Local Planning Agency for a hearing before it comes back to the board for a vote. County planner Steve Swanke said the earliest the ordinance could get a public hearing will be in July.

The board set two conditions: that impact fee revenue doesn't wind up replacing existing road construction money and that exemptions are made for first-time homebuyers and low-income buyers.

If approved, the transportation impact fee for a single-family home in unincorporated Brevard and Rockledge would go from \$1,414.73 to \$4,353. The cost of condos, apartments, commercial and retail buildings also would triple.

Some say it's a long overdue move to adopt the amount a consultant six years ago recommended the county should charge. The consultant based its recommendation on a number of factors at the time: roadway construction costs, land values for right of way acquisition and other factors. Instead of adopting the full amount, though, county commissioners adopted a fee that was 40 percent more than the existing impact fee of \$855 per house to reflect the increase in the consumer price index for a 10-year period.

They also voted to raise the fee 1 percent a year. Had they stuck to that plan it would have taken another 70 years to reach full value, said Maureen Rupe, an activist from Port St. John.

"We're further behind than when we started," Rupe said. "They need to do another study just to see how far behind we really are."

Another study would take at least six months, Swanke said.

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