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County looks to shift costs to developers Commissioners to make rules for road improvements, new schools in growing areas.

OCALA - Developers are going to have to pick up the cost of roads if they want to develop in Marion County, and they are going to have to kick in for schools, too.

At a workshop Wednesday, the Board of County Commissioners discussed long- and short-term solutions to the problem of paying for roads to keep up with the development. They also are looking for ways to address the need for more schools caused by that development.

"The rush to do it now is because we have an unusual volume coming in in this (comprehensive) plan amendment here," Commissioner Randy Harris said.

Next week the commissioners will be considering more than 70 large-scale amendments to the county's comprehensive plan. They will evaluate the plans and decide whether to transmit them to the state Department of Community Affairs for review.

Harris said he wants an overall picture of the effect of each of these developments on the county's roads, and he wants every developer put on notice in future development agreements that the developer will be responsible for meeting all the county's regulations, which could include additional fees in certain regional, delineated areas for roads and schools.

It is not only the unprecedented growth along some of the county's major arteries that are putting pressure on the infrastructure. There is a less obvious potential for traffic problems that could erupt should developers of old, approved, but not constructed subdivisions decide to start building those plans.

"We are not planning far enough in advance," Harris said. "The county needs to establish a level of service on roadways."

He said a developer can pre-pay transportation impact fees today and capture capacity. What that means is that the developer pays the county in advance for

a share of the cost of road improvements that will support the number of additional cars which will be on the roads because of his development.

But, by the time the developer goes to build, the cost of the road improvements may exceed what has been paid.

"They may be able to lock in trips, but they should not be able to lock in costs," said Commissioner Jim Payton.

Harris said he would like to get away from the practice of phasing in developments and, instead, make developers meet an established level of service on roadways.

With land values in the county soaring, the cost of land to build roads or improve intersections is increasing.

Harris said he wants to have delineated areas where land prices and the cost to build roads are escalating. Those include areas around portions of State Road 200, U.S. 27 and County Road 326.

"You have to treat all developers the same," Harris said. "They have to have the same fair and equitable contribution. That's a policy issue."

The commission wants a policy developed that lays out exactly what will be expected of developers so they will know before filing an application. And commissioners want that policy in place within 60 days before the large-scale amendments come back from the state. Once the state gives its approval, the county has to review the project to see if it meets all the county's requirements.

With the policy in place, the county then can insist that any agreement will contain language that requires the developer to pay the cost of transportation and school improvements so a certain level of service is maintained.

"Let developers build the roads," Harris said. "They do it faster, quicker and cheaper. We have to help with some condemnations."

Payton said that language is in the developers' agreement.

As far as the schools go, Harris said that, if the school board cannot get information to the county about what schools' needs are, the county should examine what other counties do to see if there is a formula that could be used to charge developers for schools.

"I would rather deal with it with individual schools," Chairman Andy Kesselring said. If the information is gathered district-wide, he said, it does not address

the impact on a local school.

Payton agrees that there should be some sort of aggregate cost to developers for infrastructure, but he is a little less optimistic than Harris.

"The challenge is how do we do it in such a way that we don't run afoul of state laws regarding vesting and impact fees," Payton said. He said whatever is done has to be legally defensible.

The commissioners are holding a workshop in commission chambers on Aug. 30 to discuss traffic concurrency management areas. At that time, they may ask consultant Tindale-Oliver & Associates Inc. to come back with a recommendation on transportation impact fees and also look at the delineated areas, where development has more of an effect on infrastructure, like State Road 200.

"No matter what scheme you use, you don't have enough money," Payton said. "I think people winked at it. We have to stop winking."

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