

County's choice of consultant divisive

By Garrett Pelican, News-Leader

Nassau County Commissioners voted 4-1 Monday to award a consultancy to Gillette & Associates, Inc., despite a recommendation from staff to hire McCranie & Associates.

The decision drew opposition from engineer Daniel McCranie and Commissioner Steve Kelley, but the board accepted Gillette as its mobility fee consultant as recommended by Commissioner Danny Leeper's Impact Fee & Concurrency Task Force.

The mobility fee system is being billed as a replacement for transportation concurrency, which the board repealed last month in a bid to encourage more business and development. Under the old system, developers were billed for any traffic impacts their projects posed.

Commissioners were to choose one of three firms under continuing contracts - Gillette, McCranie or Atkins Construction Corp. - for the job, but miscommunication led the task force and staff to make separate, and conflicting, recommendations.

"I'm going to stand firmly behind our staff," Kelley said.

McCranie urged commissioners to follow their staff's recommendation.

"They are your senior advisers," he said. "... I truly believe we have the best team and we can do the best job for this county."

Citing the task force's experience and hundreds of hours its members spent studying planning and development during the past year, County Attorney David Hallman said committee members were experts on the subject matter.

"After 22 years of doing this, I would put this task force up against any team of engineers and planners," he told the board.

"I think the expertise we have on that task force exceeds staff at the moment," said Leeper. "I have to say that."

County Manager Ted Selby said following a Jan. 18 commission meeting, staff started evaluating the firms. Upon learning the task force was reviewing them as well, Selby said staff finished their evaluations, but deferred to the task force. The task force voted 7-1 to award the work to Gillette.

Kelley proposed that the firms present to the board before it rendered a decision, but Leeper rejected the suggestion.

McCranie said the process had been unfair because the task force created its criteria after the firms had presented, and wondered why representatives from Atkins had not objected as well.

"We did not know the criteria we were presenting," he added.

"I don't know we had a level playing field there," said Commissioner Barry Holloway.

Leeper rejected that suggestion, pointing out that all three firms had equal opportunities to present before staff and the task force.

Tom Ford, vice chair of the task force, said he believed a member of county staff told McCranie his firm had the job, prompting his representatives to give a lackluster presentation. McCranie refuted that notion.

Holloway questioned the task force's role in the process when the board had already directed staff to recommend a firm. The question drew responses from task force members, several of whom attended the meeting.

One member, Robert Spaeth, said if the board believed its staff's expertise in mobility fees was greater than that of the task force, the board didn't need the task force.

"We've been a year at this thing," he said. "I've spent hundreds of hours on this as have other members."

Peter Johnson, another member, said the mobility fee issue was special and needed special expertise.

"This is not typical staff work," he said. "This is special."

Holloway said the board should clarify the task force's role in the process to avoid further missteps. Kelley and Hallman agreed, with the latter suggesting that Leeper clarify the committee's mandate at a future meeting.

Commission Chair Stacy Johnson apologized to McCranie for the confusion.