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County, school holds joint meeting on impact fees Residents express support on enacting fees



By Melissa Burnsed

"Baker County is at a cross roads between being a rural county and something more." That was how Ed Lehman, with the Northeast Florida Regional Council, opened his presentation on impact fees at the joint county commission and school board public hearing. The meeting drew more elected

officials and staffers than residents for a public forum on the proposed levies.

"People have discovered Baker County, especially South Florida developers and your elected officials are faced with finding ways to fund the infrastructure needs that accompany new growth," he added.

Lehman informed the audience that there are alternatives to impact fees. Those alternatives included a voter enacted half penny sales tax or higher property taxes. Currently the county has a millage rate of 8.96, but the state cap will allow that to be raised to 10.0 mills.

After the detailed presentation on the what impact fees are and how they can be imposed, the elected officials in attendance each had a turn with the microphone to express their views on the controversial topic. One after the other each affirmed their belief that the county and school system needed the money to help cover the costs of growth, that is projected to hit Baker County over the next ten years.

They seemed to be of a consensus that their original numbers were to high and all expressed willingness to review their studies and come back with a lower initial fee. The possibility of a gradual phase in over three years appealed to the majority of the elected representatives, who have been "bombarded with calls" according to County Manager Jason Griffis since they originally agreed to impose fees that topped \$7,000.

County residents in attendance, while sparse in numbers were virtually unanimous in their support of the fees. However, they did have concerns over the way the fees would be enacted and over the high original numbers. Questions about why traditional homes and mobile homes would be charged differing amounts, as well as the legality of exempting current residents from the fees if they build newer and bigger homes later, were fielded.

"I support ya'll 110 percent. You have paid for these studies with taxpayer money

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and your consultants have recommended the amounts, so don't sell us short now by not acting. Either we are going to pass this on to the new people who move to this county or current residents are going to have their property taxes raised," said Jack Baker. His comments were echoed by Chester Crews, "If they are going to move in here, let's make them pay. If I had my way we would put up a fence around the county to keep them out."

Newcomer Leroy Greene has recently moved to the county from South Florida and stated, "You guys want to act quick. I live down the road from Glen Plantation and new houses are popping up like pimples."

County Commissioner Alex Robinson summed up the situation. "The decision that we have to make is not the most popular, but it is the right thing to plan for the future. Duty demands that this commission find the funds to finance this county's needs including schools, buses, police, roads, recreation and fire services. The time has come. I just find it hard to believe, that with the growth we are expecting that we can't get off our duffs and do something. I pray to my God that I live long enough to pay impact fees and see my grandchildren pay them when they build homes here."

The two boards agreed to have another workshop to come up with a mutually acceptable figure and move forward with enactment.

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