

# Flowery Branch wants out of impact fee deal with Hall

City seeks level playing field with Oakwood on development

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Flowery Branch officials say they want to "even the playing field" when it comes to development impact fees.

A June 2004 agreement that has the city collecting impact fees on behalf of Hall County has come under scrutiny particularly from new Flowery Branch council members Damon Gibbs and Mary Jones.

"I just really feel like that can go away," Jones said at the council's March 17 retreat, "but I don't think we need to rattle the (county's) cage. We need to go hat in hand."

Gibbs said he is worried more about the agreement's impact on efforts to attract business than new housing, because, "from the residential standpoint, when a developer gets hit by a fee, it trickles down to the homebuyer.

"But if we're trying to attract commercial business to Flowery Branch, when (a developer) can ... go up Thurmon Tanner Parkway a mile and build cheaper than you can in the city of Flowery Branch, what incentive do you have to come to Flowery Branch?"

Thurmon Tanner runs in both Flowery Branch and Oakwood, as well as unincorporated Hall. Oakwood, just north of Flowery Branch, hasn't charged impact fees since the previous special purpose local option sales tax program expired in 2008, per an agreement with the county.

During the years it participated, Oakwood "ended up sending (the county) a lot more money than we ever got from SPLOST, with the development we had here," City Manager Stan Brown said last week.

Tom Oliver, chairman of the Hall County Board of Commissioners, said he believed the issue with Flowery Branch needs to be explored.

"It's not right to have one (city) under different guidelines than the other ones," he said. "And I think it should be the county's responsibility to first of all understand what the rules are and (secondly) establish some true direction for them."

Impact fees were all the rage among local governments during booming economic times. There were seen as a way to help pay for roads, parks, public safety and other needs affected by the growth.

But when the economy fell, they were seen as a deterrent to growth.

In the past couple of years, Oakwood and Flowery Branch officials talked about exploring

impact fees in their respective cities, but the idea never gained much steam.

"We need to talk to the county commissioners and see if they're open to have a discussion about (the county fees)," said Gibbs, who began serving his first term on the council Jan. 1.

"I think, with our accessibility to (Interstate 985), we have some pluses, but when you've got two small municipalities fighting for the same industries, my goal is to get us on a little more level playing field as far as those fees go."

Hall County impact fees vary widely, depending on the type of development.

For example, a fee for a single-family home is \$1,241.93. The charge is \$86.36 for each 1,000 square feet for a shopping center and \$65.67 for each 1,000 square feet for a grocery store.

Flowery Branch collected \$1.35 million for Hall County, with the largest amount, \$753,441, set aside for parks, through October 2011, according to a chart prepared by Flowery Branch Finance Director Jeremy Perry, who worked previously for Hall County.

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