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Impact fees suspended again

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For those who detest impact fees, two items of good news came from the county commission on Tuesday: impact fees were suspended again, and if they do come back in a year, they'll be one-third smaller.

In a two-hour discussion, the commission looked at a \$110,000 study by Duncan Associates of Austin, Tex.

"Services cost about one-third as much as three years ago," Jim Duncan said. The recession generally has lowered the cost of buying asphalt, building roads, and paying construction workers, so impact fees can be lowered by the county.

A 30-minute long, not-very-fruitful discussion of whether to charge one impact fee for any size house turned out to be a moot point. Ray Royce, a member of the impact fee committee, explained that the idea was to make the three categories simpler.

"If you're going to build a 2,500 square-foot house (the highest of the three categories), the difference between that and a 2,499 square-foot house (the middle category) turns out to be about \$2,000," Royce said. "So the lesson is, build a 2,499 square-foot house."

Why not, he asked, collapse the three categories into one? Every house pays the same fee.

"I'm all for consistency," John Hawthorne rose to answer Royce's rhetorical question, "except when it affects my category." The 50 people in the crowd laughed, because Hawthorne is the executive director of Habitat for Humanity. All the homes he builds are in the 0-1,499 square-foot category.

"How about if you collapse the top two?" Hawthorne suggested. That would leave the affordable housing category with a cheaper impact fee and the expensive homes with a higher fee.

True, pointed out John McClure, who represents the school board. However, he wondered if the larger homes - which may be second homes for retirees - might not have a smaller impact (fewer schoolchildren) than homes under 1,499 square feet.

The discussion ended with County Attorney Ross Macbeth reminding commissioners that the Duncan study didn't include impact figures for a one-size-fits-all housing category. If the commission wants to adopt one or two residential categories instead of three, they'll need to base their votes on numbers, not guesses.

The commissioners voted 5-0 to continue the moratorium until June 30, 2011. At that time, the suspension will expire. If they do not vote again, the fees will return to the 30 percent level adopted on Jan. 1, 2007.