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## Impact-fee moratorium continues

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An 11-member citizen's review committee recommended the reinstatement of impact fees, but Highlands County commissioners voted 4-0 against the idea on Tuesday evening.

Only two people spoke in favor of the fees, which were adopted in 2006 and instituted in 2007. However, when the economy soured, commissioners suspended collections in June 2009, and again in June 2010.

Collections would have started again today if the commission had not acted.

"If we are still going to have to make infrastructure improvements, what is the source of revenue?" asked Ray Royce, one of the review committee members who voted for and spoke Tuesday in favor of reinstating collections.

"It's easy to say, 'No new taxes,' but we have to tell people if there are going to be fewer services. The day is going to come when we have to provide the infrastructure."

Barbara Stewart, who chairs the county commission, agreed. Impact fees, she said, are fair and equitable. They don't discourage people from moving here, and they don't discourage growth.

"You can look at Gainesville and see if I'm correct," she said.

However, she said, the timing to reinstate the fees is wrong. "I don't think it would accomplish anything to re-implement them."

Neither the impact fees nor the moratorium ever got a fair test, Commissioner Don Elwell reminded the crowd of several dozen. Twice, they were asked to stand up if they agreed with letters that were read by the Group for Better Government and the Heartland Association of Realtors, and nearly all appeared to favor the moratorium.

The fees, Elwell said, were implemented just as the economy was declining, and the moratorium came in with the Great Recession.

Marlene Barger, speaking for the Group for Better Government, noted that the population has declined from 100,000 in 2008 to 98,786 in 2010.

"Clearly, the economic climate in Highlands County is more foreboding than last year when the board first extended the moratorium on impacts," she said in a letter also signed by Chip Boring and Peter Albert.

Boring, a former county commissioner, also read the real estate association's letter: "Reimplementation of these punitive fees will prove to be the final death blow to more than a few local contractors."

Several contractors came to the microphone, including Mark Gose, who said his company employed 47 during the boom and is now down to six.