

## Lee County reduces fees to spur business growth

By TARA E. McLAUGHLIN

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Joint Implant Surgeons of Florida, a successful medical practice looking to expand, has been stifled for almost two years.

Its two surgeons have more patients than they can handle, but the most likely option for growth involved paying about \$200,000 in county fees.

A decision by Lee County Commissioners on Tuesday has set the company back on a track to double its business.

The board, in a 4-0 decision with Commissioner Tammy Hall absent, agreed to reduce or waive certain fees meant to pay for increased traffic where new businesses develop.

"When you take that money you could turn into jobs, if (the county) will work with us and allow us to move forward, what we can give back to the community we feel will far outweigh (the value of the one-time fee) over time," said Renee Humbert, the practice's business manager.

Lee County will join more than a dozen other counties and cities, including Collier County and the city of Bonita Springs, in governments adjusting down development in hopes of spurring growth.

Medical offices, seen to be one of the most intense uses bringing the most traffic, have some of the highest fees.

Doctors pay \$24,400 per 1,000 square foot compared with \$7,400 for general office space.

Now, under the new rules good for two years, doctors will pay the same as general office.

Additionally, any business will not have to pay the so-called change-of-use fees when they bring a more intense use to an existing office space.

The community development department will also update its road impact fee study giving commissioners a chance to again adjust fees.

The program will sunset after two years and the study could be complete in six or seven months.

At least one commissioner wasn't sure the county's economy would see a dramatic change following the impact fee waivers.

"I have observed other counties doing the same thing and there was not an immediate boost," Commissioner Frank Mann said.

He's holding out hope, but said the county's role is just a piece of the puzzle. Banks need to lend more money and the development community needs to find confidence again, he said.

Commissioner John Manning suggested more could be done.

"I would like to see at least a moratorium or reduction of impact fees until the study is done," Manning said.

Still, the measure brought out about half a dozen supporters urging the board to implement the cuts.

"If a medical practice moves into an existing building, about 24 percent of cost of construction is absorbed in change of use impact fees," said Mark Stevens of Stevens Construction and the Lee Building Industry Association. Reducing the fees "provides an excellent incentive to in-fill existing space. It makes us more competitive."

That's what has happened in Collier County a year and nine months since it waived its change-of-use fees.

Forty businesses took advantage of the program in the first year: 20 new businesses and 20 existing.

"It's definitely doing good," said Amy Patterson, Collier's impact fee and economic development manager. "The other good thing is more and more people are finding out about it and people are able to ask. And they're making an informed decision on where to locate. It helps to fill out some vacant space."

Additionally, commissioners approved two bonds that will allow a couple of new projects to go forward. A \$30 million loan will be used to build a 205,000 square-foot health care supply distribution center on 23 acres at 2727 Winkler Ave. A \$27 million loan will pay for a 4-story, 400-bed dormitory on the Edison State College campus at 8099 College Parkway. The county approves the federal bonds but is not financially responsible for them.

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