

Martin County commissioners, candidates debate impact fees for new auto dealerships

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STUART — The controversy over as much as \$1 million in impact fees on three luxury auto dealerships planned on U.S. 1 escalated Tuesday during a Martin County Commission meeting.

Several county commissioners, commission candidates and civic activists took sides on the efforts by Brickell Motors of Miami to reduce the impact fees.

"Dare I say, it's an election cycle," said Commission Chairman Ed Ciampi, who is forgoing a re-election bid in District 5 to run for Clerk of the Circuit Court.

Stuart City Manager Paul Nicoletti will have the final say on the amount of the city and county impact fees that will be charged for the new auto dealerships because the project is within the city limits.

Fee supporters argue they should be increased to cover a greater share of the costs of public facilities needed to accommodate new businesses and homes. However, opponents argue the fees should be lowered to promote construction and economic development.

An engineering firm is conducting a traffic study to determine whether it is justified to charge Brickell Motors of Miami a total of \$707,916 in city and county impact fees for Audi and Infiniti dealerships planned on U.S. 1.

The impact fees could exceed \$1 million when a third luxury dealership is added to the \$20 million-plus project, a representative of the auto dealer has said. But he argued the road impact fees for the luxury car dealerships are too high because they will attract far fewer customers than typical dealerships.

County Commissioner Doug Smith questioned whether local governments should continue to impose impact fees when there is relatively high unemployment because they could discourage economic development.

"One million dollars is a lot of money in impact fees," Smith said. "If it's at the expense of losing this investment in our community that's where we hope this thing really gets a fair look."

Henry Copeland, one of two Republicans challenging Smith in the Aug. 14 primary in District 1, said the county's job creation incentive program could be expanded to include all new and existing businesses.

"It's fine for an applicant to have their own impact fee study, but I hope you will resist the temptation to with open arms endorse this," Copeland said.

The two Republican commission candidates in District 5, John Haddox and Brandon Tucker, both said they agree with the review of the impact fees for the auto dealerships and want to see the new businesses built on U.S. 1 to create jobs and enhance the tax base.

Jupiter Island Commissioner Anne Scott, who is challenging County Commissioner Patrick Hayes in the Republican primary in District 3, questioned the fairness of giving the new auto dealerships a break on their impact fees.

"They're not an impediment to business or to progress," Scott said. "Other car dealerships have paid their impact fees in full. Other businesses have paid their fair share. We can't require one business to pay or one homeowner to pay and then say others can have a pass."

Hayes remained silent during the commission discussion about the impact fees for the auto dealerships.

County Growth Management Director Nicki van Vonno and Principal Planner Samantha Horowitz said the county receives less than one request a year for an independent study of the impact fees for a specific project.

The new auto dealerships hired an engineering consultant to perform a traffic study to determine the impact the new businesses will have on nearby roads, Nicoletti said. The report is expected to be submitted to the city in July and a decision on any impact fees adjustments would be due within 15 days.

Nicoletti promised the county commissioners he will be fair to the auto dealer and local taxpayers.

"Honestly, I wouldn't be overly concerned about it's application," Nicoletti told the county commissioners. "It's certainly not been an issue in the past. We really have been doing this for the last 12 years without incident."

IMPACT FEES

Advantage Ford, 2003

Address: 4000 S.E. Federal Highway, Stuart

Location: Northwest corner of U.S. 1 and Market Place

Site size: 10 acres

Building size: 63,995 square feet

City impact fees: \$30,618

County impact fees: \$347,728

Total impact fees: \$378,346

Johnson Honda, 2009Address: 4200 S.E. Federal Highway, Stuart

Location: Southwest corner of U.S. 1 and Market Place

Site size: 5.8 acres

Building size: 34,362 square feet

City impact fees: \$174,215

County impact fees: \$209,844

Total impact fees: \$384,059

Mar-Stuart Audi and Infiniti, 2012

Location: U.S. 1 north of Advantage Ford

Site size: 12.3 acres

Building size: 60,283 square feet

City impact fees: 274,890

County impact fees: 433,026

Total impact fees: \$707,916

Final build out: 93,000 square feet

Potential impact fees at \$11.75 per square foot: \$1,091,820



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