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One-year moratorium on Polk impact fees looking possible

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BARTOW - A one-year moratorium on almost all Polk County impact fees on new construction - as a means to kick-start the local economy - became a real possibility Thursday.

The moratorium, which would exempt only the impact fee that goes to education, was adopted as an agenda item for the July 7 County Commission meeting when commissioners held an afternoon work session in Bartow.

County commissioners Ed Smith and Sam Johnson said a temporary halt to impact fees is needed to create jobs, bring new business to the county and encourage expansion of existing businesses.

"We have a situation economically in Polk County that we have to deal with," Smith said. "I don't feel that it's the government's part to try and fix the economy, but it wasn't our government that put us in this situation."

Johnson said the moratorium can help more than it could hurt.

"A huge issue for me is the transformation of jobs in the county and the people who want to go back to work," Johnson said. "I think anything that we can do to remove a roadblock in the way of creating jobs and new businesses wanting to build here would be a positive."

But Commissioner Jean Reed said an impact-fee moratorium is not a good idea at this time.

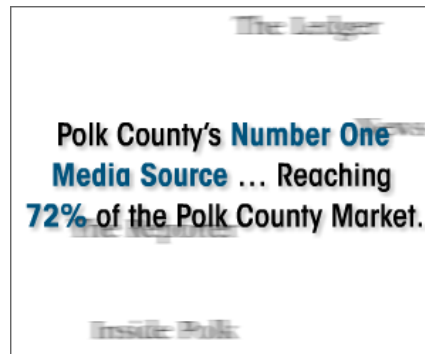
"In a tough budget year, we have already delayed many projects and we are looking to get revenues," Reed said. "Even though I'm all for more jobs in the county, I don't think this is the answer."

At their regular meeting Wednesday, commissioners will consider separately an agenda item dealing with the construction impact fee that helps pay for school facilities. Options include keeping the fee at the current rate, temporarily waiving it or even doubling it.

The Polk County School Board voted recently to recommend that the county government double the impact fee carved for schools.

In Polk County, impact fees on new construction are collected for eight kinds of public facilities: Transportation (county and state roads), corrections (jails), emergency medical services, parks (regional and area), school facilities, libraries, fire-rescue and law enforcement.

During Thursday's work session, county Budget and Management Services Director Todd Bond presented figures on impact fee collections since the 2004-05 fiscal year.



The collections showed a two-year increase followed by two years of major decline. Polk County's impact fee collections reached a peak in 2006-07 at more than \$34 million. However, collections fell to less than \$25 million in 2007-08 and dropped to less than \$11 million in 2008-09 as the housing boom went bust and the national economic recession took hold.

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County Commission Chairman Bob English said the board is facing a couple of questions, including giving up more than \$5 million in projected impact fees.

"I am for impact fees because I feel that growth has to pay for itself," English said. "But I am more willing to sacrifice more than \$5 million now than sacrificing \$34 million. I don't know how I'm going to vote, but I'm leaning toward the moratorium."

Smith said something has to be done to put people back to work.

"Business expansion equals jobs and that's what we need right now," he said. "We have got a bad reputation for being not business friendly in Polk County, and we have got to fix that because we have priced the mom-and-pop business right out of the market."

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