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Pamlico County growth sprouts an unpopular Field of FEES

May 07, 2006
 CHARLIE HALL
SUN JOURNAL STAFF

'Impact' costs bemoaned

The pinch between residential growth and providing water and sewer services has produced controversial impact fees in Pamlico County.

The outcry has been loud — including local Realtors, developers, property owners and elected officials. They say the fees will stunt growth and force young people to move away.

The county implemented a \$1,500 water impact fee a year ago, and more recently, independent Bay River Metro Sewerage District raised its \$1,080 impact fees to as much as \$12,500 for subdivision lots. Individuals pay \$4,500, but must substantially complete their home within a year or face the higher fee.

It's distressing for county native H.L. Williams. A plumber by trade, he had planned to tear down a dilapidated house on property he owns and build his mother a new home.

"I'm going to build it myself, so I can't get it done in a year," he said recently. He's also frustrated because there is a septic system in the back yard of the Prescott Road property, but it needs a new drain field.

"I was going to do that myself," he said. "But, because the (sewer) line runs along the road, I was told I had to hook up."

Whether his mother gets a new house is now



Charlie Hall/Sun Journal

Construction is under way on condo units at The Catch on Raccoon Creek near Bayboro, where the sewer impact fee was \$1,080. Planned units 50 yards away will likely carry a price tag of \$12,500 each for sewer impact.

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not as certain as it was before the Bay River spike.

"I've lived here all my life," he said. "I've got children and I want them to be able to afford to live here too when they get out of school. But, I don't know."

Home buying

Julie Rahm, public relations spokeswoman for the Pamlico County Board of Realtors, said there are fee-hike concerns amid its 40-plus members.

It boils down to the affordability of new housing.

"These fees will be paid by home buyers, not the developers or the home builders because they will simply add the cost to the purchase price on your home," she said. "That will significantly reduce affordability, especially for low- and middle-income families."

County Commissioner Carl Ollison has repeatedly bemoaned all impact fees as a deterrent to longtime and young county citizens being able to remain residents.

Rahm said the Realtors agree.

"It's not just a tax on new residents, because it will impact our current Pamlico County residents who are building a new home as well," she said. "Whether they are renters trying to buy their first new home, or young families moving up to larger new homes or especially in our area (Oriental), seniors looking to buy a smaller new home — everyone will pay the fees."

The spikes add another ingredient to the layers of new homeowner costs.

"We all work hard to get them to their closing, and adding one more fee doesn't make that any easier on them," she said of home buyers."

She said the Pamlico Realtor group was not contacted prior to the fee hikes by either the county or Bay River.

The county water impact fee has produced about \$97,000 in the first nine and a half months.

The county water department has a savings account of \$3.1 million, according to the county finance office.

Developers

Developer/builder Dale Swiggett — who is building 15 condo units on Raccoon Creek outside Bayboro — has been an outspoken critic of the sewer impact hike in particular and Bay River in general.

He complained about the time lag to get approval for nine of his 15 condo units at The Catch, for \$1,080 each. The other six now face the new impact fee, along with his plans for 10 or 12 units in the Stonewall area.

The new impact fees came into play last month when the district updated a contract to provide sewer for River Dunes — the county's largest planned subdivision, with 600 homes.

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A new Oriental sewer plant project was needed to provide service to River Dunes, which paid \$7.5 million in the new impact fees, along with a \$2.6 million advance to the district. That money will be paid back through Oriental district rebates and 33 percent of the revenue string, with a 20-year payback.

“River Dunes happens to be in the right place at the right time. They need something. We need something. And it actually it works out pretty good for both of us,” said Bay River Superintendent Jim Krauss. “Probably more so in our favor than in River Dunes’ favor.”

The \$13.8 million Oriental project should be complete in a year, according to Krauss.

The new impact fees, however, are district-wide, which includes areas from Bayboro west.

Swiggett questions the validity of the \$12,500, which he called an arbitrary number. He said land owners in areas outside Oriental were being saddled with the burden of that area being high growth. He said a more equitable solution would have been to have high-impact zones, with fees rated accordingly.

“It sounds like they are making things up as they go along,” he said. “The ultimate liability lies within the people who are responsible for seating this (sewer) board.”

Reaction

County commissioners, who appoint five of the 11 Bay River board members, reacted to the impact hike by terminating its contract to provide discount billing and collections to the sewer district.

The board stopped short of pulling its sewer board appointees, although that was proposed by Ollison.

“I guarantee there is no plan to relieve that \$12,000 in the future. They have just accepted this as a permanent income,” Swiggett said.

The 11-member Bay River Board — reduced to nine after two recent resignations, including County Commissioner Paul Delamar III — did appoint a committee to look at possibly reducing impact fees outside the Oriental district. No hard numbers have been formulated, according to Chairman James Spencer. The committee meets again Thursday, expecting to produce recommendations for the full board later in the month.

Krauss insists the impact fees were the sewer district’s only option.

“The board had to deal with increased impact fees whether River Dunes was here or not,” Krauss said. “The big point is, we’ve been subsidizing the impact fee system for years with grants here in Pamlico County, which has worked out well. But, the days of grants are drying up, and we have to find a way to deal with that.”

More than 2,000 current connections won’t be affected.

“The \$12,500 applies to developments only, so the developer will carry the lion’s share of the cost here,” Krauss said. “The \$12,500 is a straight-out impact fee for developers. The premise is the developer impacts the system in a greater way than an individual does because they are going to take up bigger chunks of capacity at one time. And, they’re doing it for profit, whereas an individual is not.”

Krauss said in the initial impact hike planning, it was an across-the-board application, at about \$10,500.

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"We looked at the percent of development versus individual usage, and we put the lion's share on the developer," he said.

Krauss said his projections show future county growth to be 80 percent in the hands of developers and 20 percent by individuals building homes.

"It looks like we will generate enough to pay the (River Dunes) rebates," he said.

If the growth doesn't come in 20 years to pay off the \$2.6 million debt, Bay River can pay \$100, and all is forgiven.

Krauss said the district was at a crossroads, and decided on the high impact fees.

"We've got two choices," he said. "We can do nothing and just say OK, everybody, we're out of sewer. We're out of capacity, and pretty much, that's it. Or we can fulfill our duties, which is to provide wastewater for this area. We can provide for an environmentally safe way to do that — which is not septic tanks — and then find a way to pay for it."

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