



December 29, 2011

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By Lee Logan, Times Staff Writer

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As Florida begins an overhaul of its growth management policies, Pasco became one of a handful of communities this year on the cutting edge of developing a new tool to combat urban sprawl.

You read that right. Pasco. Cutting edge. Combatting sprawl. Same sentence. How in the world did that happen?

"What Pasco has done is very, very positive," said Charlie Gauthier, a Tallahassee planning consultant and former top official in the state's planning agency.

Pasco commissioners in July voted unanimously to create mobility fees, which are a charge on new development to help pay for roads, sidewalks and bus shelters. Because fees are lower in urban areas than the old transportation impact fees, officials believe the new approach will help concentrate growth in those areas while keeping rural areas less developed.

Assistant county attorney David Goldstein, who helped craft much of the plan, said it marks a significant step forward.

"That Pasco would be the leader on doing something as it relates to mobility and transit - that wouldn't have happened 10 years ago."

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The term "mobility fee" first appeared in a major legislative growth bill in 2009. The bill essentially told state officials to study the idea as a possible replacement for the road financing system known as "concurrency" that many developers felt was cumbersome and unfair.

The old system put the cost of new roads onto developers and their customers via pricey traffic studies, impact fees and the threat of a moratorium (or a big, unexpected price tag) if a project generated too much traffic.

The new mobility fees are less expensive in much of the county because some future property taxes are pledged as a subsidy.

"There was a general frustration with concurrency and a search for a different approach," said Gauthier, who participated in a 2009 group that wrote an early report about the proposal. "There was sort of this general idea of, 'Well, suppose we have this mobility fee?' It was never sort of fleshed out."

Now, Pasco and a few other counties are fleshing it out.

The plan links three key concepts: transportation, growth and economic development. On a basic level, it's a mechanism to pay for roads, bus stops and sidewalks. But the fee has larger goals. Lower fees in urban areas act

as an incentive for developers to build dense projects in west Pasco and along the county's southern edge. And new office or industrial projects are exempt from road fees if they build in an urban area.

"The urban people travel less. They shouldn't be paying as much as the rural people," Goldstein said. "If you live in an area where you drive more, you should pay more."

The concept is getting a lot of attention. Goldstein has given so many presentations about the mobility fee over the past several months that he has lost count. He's getting calls from several other counties, including Pasco's big brother, Hillsborough.

"They seemed to be impressed with what we did," he said. "They appear to be looking like they want to do something similar."

A few other counties are moving ahead with slightly different versions of the plan at the same time. Alachua is the farthest along, enacting what officials there dubbed "Multi-Modal Transportation Mitigation." Jacksonville also crafted a similar model but recently decided to hold off for a year.

The old method, said Jeff Hays, a senior transportation planner for Alachua, "wasn't working well for the public sector or the private sector. This was a response to deal with it in a more holistic manner." Like Pasco, the plan recognizes the reduced road impacts of pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods and communities near future transit hubs. They get a break in the fees.

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Of course the big question is: Will this newfangled scheme work?

"That's a very good question," said Karen Seggerman, a researcher at the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research. "Particularly as growth has slowed, it'll take a lot longer to see the results. I definitely think it's part of the equation."

Developers might have to rethink whether they rely so much on typical suburban neighborhoods. And there are larger demographic forces at play. Older people are moving closer to town, and younger folks also want to live close to work and shopping.

It also helped, Goldstein said, that the county has been revamping its planning for the past several years and commissioners adopted a strategic plan that says "what we want to be when we grow up."

John Hagen, president of the Pasco Economic Development Council, said eliminating the fees for new businesses helps bolster his sales pitch to business owners. Pasco has plenty of available land. Tax rates are lower than in Pinellas and Hillsborough. By the way, there aren't any transportation impact fees.

"We're building it into our promotions," he said. "It's definitely one of the key things we're telling people about."

He added: "Will it make a bad deal good? No. But combined with some of the other things we have, I think it makes a compelling case."

It may have already helped. Officials say the plan was a factor in luring the planned Raymond James Financial satellite campus to a site in Wesley Chapel's Wiregrass development.

Goldstein said the lower fees for traditional neighborhoods (think alleys, smaller lots, connected street grids) are getting developers to give that style a second look. Dense projects near future transit hubs are probably still years away.


But he said it's a victory just to get the plan passed. Vocal opponents include some members of the tea party, who regard the idea as an infringement on basic property rights. Large rural landowners also have a lot to lose. Their property stands to lose value as growth is concentrated in urban areas.

One solution to that problem: allow rural owners to sell "development rights" to urban developers who want to build a dense project. Owners can still make money from their land, but it doesn't encourage sprawl. Commissioners heard an early draft of the idea earlier this month and will flesh out the plan in workshops next year.

"I don't think you can underestimate the political courage it took for them to do something innovative like this," Goldstein said. "They could easily sit back and see what other communities are doing and be reactive. Our board didn't do that."

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St. Petersburg Times

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