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Paying for growth can be thorny

After raising taxes, Polk commissioners consider higher impact fees

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In less than two months, the Polk County Commission has raised existing taxes, implemented others and will look at increasing more impact fees. The moves might come with a cost.

Their decision to make life a bit more expensive in Polk County puts commissioners in a vulnerable position for re-election, according to Aubrey Jewett, a University of Central Florida political-science professor.

"In Florida, and Polk is no different, we are generally an area that likes low taxes," Jewett said. "Therefore . . . they may be setting themselves up for problems."

But commissioners' votes may not necessarily hurt their chances of political survival.

"Sometimes you can raise taxes in Florida and survive another day," he said.

If the commission can point out how much money will be raised and where it is going to be spent, Jewett said, the officials might not run into re-election problems.

"You have to be able to show that it's just not money that's going to be frivolously spent."

Polk County government faces a \$581 million shortfall, also known as an "infrastructure gap," for big-ticket projects such as road construction, parks and libraries.

Impact fees cannot be used to fund the existing infrastructure gap -- only future growth.

Commissioners say they need tax increases to raise money to fix the looming infrastructure gap.

Commissioner Bob English, who championed the implementation of a municipal service tax unit -- also known as an MSTU -- said he doesn't think it will hurt his political career. Property taxes can be levied



to those living within the MSTU, and in Polk's case the MSTU is all of the unincorporated county.

"I think the people are going to recognize that we are assuming leadership and we are not afraid to lead," English said.

"We are going to create a quality of life that the people are entitled to," he said. "I think it will have a great return on investment on companies coming to our county and create jobs."

English noted that some residents support him and the tax increases. And for those who don't, he said, "They'll come around when they see the benefits being provided by everything we are doing."

Even Commissioner Randy Wilkinson, who voted against most of the tax boosts, said he doesn't think the increases will necessarily hurt his fellow members.

"You hear all these threats of people losing their jobs, and it hasn't panned out," Wilkinson said.

Of the tax increases, Jewett said, the impact fees are "probably politically the safest."

"Developers and builders usually don't like them. The public, as a whole, typically likes it," he said. "There is definitely a thought among most Floridians that growth should pay for itself."

But increases such as the public-service tax and MSTU could potentially put the commissioners at risk, especially if the increase is large enough for residents to notice, Jewett said.

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