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Port St. Lucie mulls increase in impact fee

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PORT ST. LUCIE — New-home buyers could pay to bring biotech firms like The Burnham Institute to Port St. Lucie by paying higher impact fees for public buildings, according to an economic expert who offered to study the matter for up to \$12,500.

City officials have mulled a new impact fee for economic development purposes but have shifted their attention to a simpler task: raising the amount home builders now pay to support public buildings such as police stations, city halls and, possibly, research labs.

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The extra money could be used for economic development incentives, consultant Hank Fishkind says, assuming two tests can be met: New-home buyers create the need for economic development projects, and the home buyers receive a direct benefit from the fee.

Because no other cities or counties in Florida have imposed building fees for economic development, city officials have said they'd prefer to raise money for that purpose by increasing existing impact fees rather than break ground with a one-time fee imposed on all building projects.

In a four-page proposal March 30, Fishkind said the city is considering "constructing a large building and leasing it to one or more private users," and he said he will examine the users' potential economic effects on the city and region to determine whether higher impact fees are justified.

Although City Manager Don Cooper said he could sign the contract without council approval because of the small cost, he will seek council approval Monday night to thwart future challenges.

"I don't want anyone saying we hid anything," Cooper said. "We're just amending an existing fee."

Sources have said the city must pledge about \$80 million to accompany the state's reported \$250 million to land Burnham, one of the largest medical researchers in the country. A majority of council members said they will vote to hire Fishkind and raise public building impact fees if his study shows a relationship between newcomers and the need for high-paying jobs.

"This study is of utmost importance," Councilwoman Michelle Berger said. "No one is going to be here to buy the homes if we don't have the jobs for them."

Mayor Bob Minsky said that though he's leery of raising one-time development fees even higher, the city must attract clean industry if it is to sustain its fast-growing population. There is one caveat, however.

"If there's going to be any increase in fees, I want it spent in Port St. Lucie and not Martin County," said Minsky, referring to Martin's recent request for impact fees from new homes west of Interstate 95.

Burnham is negotiating with developers of Tradition and city officials to build a satellite campus on about 75 acres at the southwest corner of Gatlin Boulevard and I-95. Sources say the researcher would be one of several biotech-related companies to cluster at the site, about 30 miles from where The Scripps Research Institute plans to build a lab in Jupiter.



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