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INSIDE THE ISSUE | ADEQUATE PUBLIC FACILITIES ORDINANCE IN LINCOLN COUNTY

Proposal on growth draws fire

Developers say cost will add to home-buyer burden

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LINCOLNTON - Planners call it a choice for developers.

Developers call it an added cost that will be passed to home buyers.

By any label, Lincoln County's proposed "adequate public facilities ordinance" will be a hot topic at public hearings this fall.

For more than a year, county commissioners, planning board members and others have discussed the ordinance as a way to better manage development.

After a workshop for those officials this month, a hearing related to the ordinance will be Oct. 3. Another hearing on the actual ordinance could happen as early as November.

Reaction likely will be mixed, as the ordinance ties development to available space in Lincoln County schools, as well as water and sewer capacity.

To some, that sounds like an impact fee, which has raised the ire of home builders in the Charlotte region and across the country.

But Kelly Atkins, Lincoln's director of building and land development, said developers who propose subdivisions for areas without adequate schools or water and sewer service have choices: wait for improvements, lower the project's density, move it elsewhere, withdraw it or pay a fee to offset the subdivision's impact.

That last option -- essentially an impact fee -- has some developers and real estate agents gearing up to argue against the ordinance.

"The Lincoln County Homebuilders Association stands against any adequate public facilities ordinance," said Gary Faulkenbury of Piedmont Construction, a member of the association's board.

Sheila Rudisill, president of the Lincoln County Board of Realtors and a broker with Piedmont Realty, said she understands the need to expand or build schools to accommodate growth, but adding to development costs isn't the answer.

Some kind of growth management is necessary, one commissioner said, before future development strains county resources.

"We need to look well beyond today," said Tom Anderson, chairman of the board of commissioners, at the Sept. 13 workshop. "One of the things we don't have the luxury of doing is nothing."

Fees or bonds?

In Lincoln County, the cost of offsetting a new home's impact would be between \$6,900 and \$7,300, consultants said. Fees haven't slowed growth in other communities, with counties in Florida and Maryland finding continued demand after approving public facilities ordinances, said Tyson Smith of White & Smith, a Kansas City, Mo., firm that helped develop Lincoln County's ordinance.

"People want to be in a particular community for a reason," Smith told officials at the workshop. "Adopting an ordinance doesn't change that reason."

The fee is an added cost, but without it county commissioners likely would have to use bonds or tax increases to add capacity in schools, water service and sewer service, said Michael Lauer of Planning Works, another Kansas City-area firm working on the ordinance. Those measures also pass the costs of growth on to homeowners, he said.

"They certainly cause some shock waves when first implemented," Lauer said of the ordinances, "but they eventually become part of the cost of doing business."

Still, an added fee for home buyers might be a hard sell.

Commissioner Alex Patton said the cost range shared by consultants "is a lot if you're living in a mobile home trying to buy that first house. ... To me, that's a major concern."

Patton also questioned if that fee would provide immediate help for schools or just add costs for home buyers while they wait for school improvements.

Lauer told commissioners to expect some "catching up" on facilities in the first few years after the ordinance is approved.

But Anderson said Lincoln County can't continue growing without a better plan to pay for expanding services.

"Growth has its problems, but it brings some pretty interesting people to Lincoln County," he said. "I don't think we necessarily want to pull up the drawbridge. ... It's time to look at ways that those who are coming can share in future costs."

Paying for Growth

Lincoln County commissioners plan to consider an adequate public facilities ordinance before the end of the year.

PRO

- Provides another funding source for improvements in schools, water service and sewer service.
- Allows developers to either wait for adequate facilities, change subdivision plans or pay a fee to offset the impact of new homes.

CON

- Adds costs to development that will be passed on to home buyers.
- Makes the housing market more expensive.
- Slows growth while developers wait for adequate facilities.

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