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Road impact fees raised 15 percent

Sarasota County to reexamine fee structure

SARASOTA -- In what promises to be an ongoing debate among the Sarasota County commissioners, the board agreed Wednesday to increase road impact fees 15 percent.

They also agreed a comprehensive study needs to be done to get a breakdown of where all of the tax money is being spent and how much money the county will need to accommodate up to 100,000 new homes. The study will include an option to pay for all future road expansion projects through the impact fee program.

In what some called a small step in a long process, the item reveals the county's woeful shortage of adequate roads now and the high costs of what will be needed in the next 25 years.

"To me, all we are doing is making the small incremental step," Commissioner Shannon Staub said at the end of the discussion. "We need to get this study to understand where we are and to change what we are doing."

Commissioner Jon Thaxton said he just wants the taxes existing and future residents pay to be fair.

He proposed stripping property taxes, gas taxes, telecommunication taxes and other taxes from road expansion projects and let those projects be funded solely by impact fees. He suggested using the money for other infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks, expanding transit and other options.

Staub immediately objected because if that were to happen, projects such as the Center Road-widening in Venice would lose a large portion of the funding.

"You can't take that money away from works in progress," she said.

Thaxton argued that it wasn't his intention to end any program, and he opted to reword his motion to have staff do an impact study that would consider the actions he suggested.

Commissioner Nora Patterson was equally concerned about Thaxton's original proposal, citing the commitment of some of those taxes to pay back various bonds.

"We really can't touch that money," Patterson said. "But, I agree, we need a more logical approach to how we pay for this stuff."

Thaxton later said the bonded projects would be untouched.

The board agreed if Thaxton's proposal were to come to fruition, it would dramatically increase impact fees.

Thaxton later admitted he didn't expect his motion to be accepted and was only putting it out to make a point.

"We have deficiencies, and we need to have a better system, which is fair, to take care of those deficiencies," he said. "If growth wants to pay its fair share, lets find out what that would mean."

The original discussion of raising impact fees was sidetracked because the existing formula to use multiple taxes to pay for expansion, which is the only way impact fees can be spent, doesn't cover one quarter of the needs.

Thaxton said the long-term planning for the county projects project a need for about \$1.8 billion in new roads. Impact fees would only pay for about \$300 million of that cost.

"It is woefully short," he said.

Clarke Davis, a county public works transportation manager, brought the issue before the board as a continuation of an Oct. 25 public hearing. That is when the board sought an increase in the fees that was fair and legally binding.

The increase to \$2,874 for single-family homes will go into effect Feb. 27. Any building permit filed before that point would pay the old rate, Davis said.

The original plan called for a potential increase of 27 percent, but recent court cases made that option unviable Wednesday.

Jay Brady, executive director of the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange, argued any increase in the impact fees is unfair. If the increase is going to happen, he asked that the county opt for a lower increase of 13.2 percent, claiming the county was double-billing builders.

Commission Chairman David Mills agreed with Brady's logic and was the lone dissenter to the 15-percent increase.

"It is not much less, but it is symbolic," Mills said.

Davis said the rate that was settled on was based on crediting builders for existing local capacity impacts and not growth, which is what Brady sought.


Thaxton concluded his remarks before the final vote by saying that giving credit to someone who didn't pay for the bills in the first place was beyond his understanding.

"People are going to get fed up," he added. "Let growth fund its fair share."

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