



Rowden Tries To Rally Residents Against Lower Impact Fees

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BROOKSVILLE - County Commissioner Diane Rowden isn't content to simply vote no on a proposal to cut impact fees by 25 percent.

Rowden also sent out an e-mail last week warning of the danger that she contends the measure poses for the county. In the message, she urges residents to show up at Tuesday's commission meeting to put their opposition on the record.

"If you're concerned about the future of our county, please come to the meeting and let your voice be heard," the e-mail begins. "We already know the builders and developers will be at the meeting in full force pushing their agenda for a reduction in impact fees."

Dropping impact fees "has only one effect: It increases the profits of the builders and the developers," Rowden wrote. Meanwhile, "the negative impact on our county would be substantial. It sacrifices our future and our infrastructure for builders and developers who have no long-term investment in our county."

She warns in the missive that "the only way to offset such a reduction in impact fees is to raise taxes. This puts the burden squarely and solely on Hernando County taxpayers, while allowing builders and developers to walk away."

"In the final analysis," she writes, "there is no need for their greed."

The 25 percent impact fee cut is an option available to counties under the state's affordable housing appropriations act, signed into law last month by Gov. Charlie Crist. The county must approve the impact fee reduction to be eligible for a portion of \$20 million in state funds to help first-time homebuyers here make a down payment on new or existing homes.

The lower impact fee rate would cover new homes and commercial/industrial development. In Hernando, cutting impact fees on new homes 25 percent would drop the fee from the current \$9,200 to \$6,200.

The potential benefit for first-time homebuyers is not worth losing the revenue needed to build roads, schools and other infrastructure, Rowden said in an interview Monday. There is already money available for down-payment assistance, she said. So she felt compelled to give residents notice about the meeting and let them know what's at stake.

"The builders and developers out there pushing this are sending out e-mails to get people to fill the boardroom," Rowden said. "I think it's important for the taxpayers, the people who are going to have to subsidize this cut, to be there, too."

Rowden, a Democrat, sent the message from her personal e-mail address. She said she put "Paid political advertisement" at the end because she is seeking re-election to her District 3 seat.

"She certainly has the right to free speech," said Dudley Hampton Jr., president of the

Hernando County Builders Association, who said he'd heard about the e-mail. The builders association, along with the Greater Hernando Chamber of Commerce, Hernando Progress and the Hernando County Association of Realtors, had asked for the issue to be put on the agenda.

However, Hampton took issue with the notion that "greedy" builders are behind the push. "People who make the statement just don't understand economics," he said. "I'm breaking even on jobs just to keep people working."

He acknowledged that lower impact fees would help a struggling building industry, including many locally owned and operated companies. But the money from the state program would help homebuyers get into existing homes that currently sit empty, Hampton said. Filling that inventory would assist a host of other industries in the county, stimulating the lagging local economy.

"Realtors, mortgage companies, title companies, home improvement stores, insurance companies," Hampton said. "All those folks live here, all those folks work here, all those folks raise their families here and all those folks vote here. We can do nothing, and let it continue, or we can try something and maybe get a little relief."

Rowden's e-mail made several assertions that aren't based in fact, Commissioner David Russell said. First-time homebuyers are the primary benefactors, not builders, he said. He also ticked off a list of local builders who have a stake in a better economy.

"To discount them as having no long-term investment in this county is absolutely absurd," Russell said.

The discussion, set for 10 a.m. Tuesday, could be postponed. Supporters of the measure sent a letter to the commission Monday asking to reschedule the item for the July 29 meeting to allow more time to prepare a presentation.

Asked if she would send out another e-mail if that happened, Rowden replied, "Sure I will."

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