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Santa Rosa working on details before beginning impact fees

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Fees on new development to help pay for roads in Santa Rosa County are closer to reality as the county looks to flesh out details soon.

The County Commission on Thursday discussed the need for a workshop on impact fees for roads. The commission is awaiting a final draft of a study that examines how much the county could collect on new residential and commercial buildings to pay for the traffic they create. Officials also will put together a list of roads in need of attention.

A workshop date has not been set. Whenever it happens, it might not be long before impact fees follow, commissioners said.

"Impact fees could come quickly, depending on how fast the board wants to do it," said County Administrator Hunter Walker.

The commission first began talking about impact fees more than a year ago as one option to pay for the county's growing road needs. An initial list of road projects put together last year put the cost at more than \$290 million.

The need for impact fees has taken on greater importance as the county needs to demonstrate a willingness to do its share to pay for improvements, Commissioner Don Salter said.

"I think the timing is very, very important," Salter said.

Santa Rosa County is in line for more than \$22 million in federal highway money from the 2005 transportation bill President Bush signed Wednesday.

- \$14.6 million is expected to four-lane 2.3 miles of Avalon Boulevard from Interstate 10 north to the CSX railroad tracks.

- \$4 million for a study to widen State Road 87 to four lanes from Whiting Field north to the Alabama state line. This would aid hurricane evacuations and benefit commerce by providing a wider route to Interstate 65 in Alabama.

- \$2.4 million for a regional study of traffic problems on U.S. 98.

Impact fees need to be carefully enacted to withstand court challenges and use more options than just tacking an additional levy on the price of a home, Commission Chairman Gordon Goodin said. Collaboration between the public and the private sectors as well as sophisticated borrowing methods also should be part of the mix, he said.

"We would certainly welcome the opportunity to participate in the county's impact fee workshop," said David Peaden, executive director of the Home Builders Association of West Florida. "Ultimately, the citizens of Santa Rosa County will pay this hefty tax on a new

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home, so I would strongly encourage them to participate in the process."

The latest draft of the impact fee study shows the county would have to add \$2,090 to the price of a single-family home to pay for the impact on roads created by vehicles from that home. Mobile homes fees would be \$1,090.

But the fees won't be enough to fix all the county's road problems.

"This is not the silver bullet that's going to take care of all our traffic problems," Goodin said.

A county sales tax is the most likely and effective option to raise money for roads and other county projects.

"I think it's imperative to have a model of different revenues to take pressure off property taxes," Salter said.

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