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Sarasota County considers more impact fee increases

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- Just months after raising impact fees on new homes, the county is looking to charge even more to pay for new roads, fire stations and other public projects.

This summer there will be public hearings on a proposal likely to call for big increases in impact fees for roads, parks and libraries. By year's end, the county may create new impact fees to pay for new jails, courts and other buildings, county commissioners said during a workshop Tuesday.

"Growth has not paid for itself, in my estimation," said Sarasota County Commissioner Shannon Staub.

The county estimates it will be \$200 million short in funding to build the new parks and recreation facilities needed by new residents in the coming decades, she said. Other estimates put the county's shortfall for new road construction at well over \$1 billion.

Sarasota County isn't alone in leaning on impact fees to pay for growth and the demand for services that it brings.

Several local governments have voted for major hikes in the last year. Among them:

- Last August, Manatee County increased its array of fees by more than 50 percent, to nearly \$15,000 for a new home.
- In March, Charlotte Charlotte raised fees by more than \$5,000 -- a near tripling -- for a 2,000-square-foot home.
- In January, Sarasota County approved an increase of nearly \$400 per home for its road impact fee and hired Duncan Associates for \$150,000 to study bigger increases.
- In recent weeks, both Punta Gorda and North Port also have considered large impact-fee increases.

On Tuesday, consultants hired by the Sarasota County Commission suggested a number of ways to legally justify fee increases.

One way is to update traffic studies -- one being used by the county is 16 years old -- to get a

better picture of how growth impacts road use, said Clancy Mullen, with the Texas firm Duncan Associates.

The head of a Florida builders group scoffed at Mullen's suggestions, saying they're merely ways to justify an increase in impact fees.

"Duncan Associates is a very reputable group, but they get paid to find more money," said Doug Buck, lobbyist for the Florida Home Builders Association. "Nobody hires them to lower impact fees."

Buck acknowledged that new homes generate more trips on local roads, but said existing homeowners are also driving more, yet the burden on paying for roads is placed on new home buyers.

Signs of the struggle to keep up with growth are evident throughout the county, where road-widening projects totaling \$80 million consume much of this year's improvements budget.

And escalating land costs mean it's getting more and more expensive for governments to widen roads because they have to buy the right-of-way, Mullen said.

"Ten years ago, projects were easy," he said. "You've kind of used those up."