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Sarasota road impact fees could go up

SARASOTA -- Deciding who should carry the burden of building and improving new roads will not be answered Wednesday as Sarasota County commissioners decide whether to increase road impact fees.

What will be decided is the amount the impact fees will increase now.

That increase is expected to be set at about 15 percent for single family homes, and varying rates in the same range for other types of new construction.

The new cost will be \$2,874 for single-family homes. The current fee rate is \$2,499 for a single-family home.

The range for other development goes from \$32.41 for houses of worship all the way up to \$28,770 for a convenience market and other commercial retail outlets.

Developers are balking at any increase in impact fees, since fees can cut into their bottom line and raise costs for prospective homeowners and businesses. They also argue the fees are going to pay for the county's past shortcomings in dealing with the road system.

But, as far as county officials are concerned, this argument does not change the reality of the transportation crisis faced by the county as it struggles to keep up with growth.

Commissioner Jon Thaxton does agree that builders often push any increase in fees onto a buyer.

"We won't be hurting their bottom line," Thaxton said.

He added he would prefer to widen the discussion and start from scratch with all impact fees and charge new residents for roads that would be built to accommodate them.

"It ought to be a zero-balance proposition," Thaxton said.

If Thaxton had his way, each new home would pay an estimated \$18,000 road impact fee. This would cover the costs of the needed infrastructure.

"We are facing huge shortfalls," Thaxton said. "If we don't do it that way, we would have to pay for everything through property taxes. It just won't be fair to people who already live here to pay for roads for the new arrivals."

He uses the example of the county's long-range transportation plan, which projects transportation needs to 2030, and based on the current fee schedule, the money just doesn't add up.

Sarasota County would need approximately \$1.8 billion in road work done to keep up with expected growth. That does not include transit needs, Interstate 75 and several other projects that receive their funding from other sources.

With a projected 100,000 new homes being built in the coming years, at \$2,874 per home, the money raised would total about \$287.4 million, leaving a transportation shortfall of more than \$1.5 billion.

"This 15 percent increase is just the first step and only affects new building, not anyone already established," Thaxton said.

He said there are political and economic reasons why the commissioners "may or may not want impact fees to fund the total costs for new growth infrastructure. But as it is now, we don't even know what that cost is."

He admits getting his idea of zero-balance growth is going to be a tough sell Wednesday and in the future.

"It is a simple idea, but educating people about the good it would do is going to be tough," Thaxton said.

He has asked county staff to provide the answers to basic questions, such as:

* How much will it cost to build the roads needed by new growth over a given period of time and how much money are impact fees expected to generate over that same time period?

* What transportation network is required to implement Sarasota County's adopted Comprehensive Plan to maintain a Level of Service C (and D for state roads). What would such a transportation network look like, how much would it cost and how much revenue would be available to build it?

If approved, the impact fee change would go into effect Monday, Feb. 27. All building permits applied for prior to that date will be exempt from the new fees.

The board is expected to take up the issue Wednesday during their afternoon session at 1:30 p.m. at the Sarasota County Administration Center, 1660 Ringling Blvd., Sarasota.

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By BOB REDDY

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