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Shock treatment

Impact-fee increases are tough to swallow but necessary

Charlotte County is moving forward on plans to adopt long-overdue increases in its impact fees -- the money it collects to offset the

effects of new development on public infrastructure.

During a workshop Tuesday, the county commissioners showed proper sensitivity to affordable housing by suggesting that a tiered fee system might be more equitable. Such a system is worth exploring in the future, but Charlotte's pressing need is to bring its fees in line with the state average and those of neighboring counties and prevent it from falling further behind in accommodating growth.

Dr. James Nicholas, a University of Florida professor who's helped set fee schedules for governments across the state, presented and explained the draft report recommending the fee increases.

Nicholas said tiered systems aren't common in Florida, but that doesn't mean they're not appropriate. Affordable housing is a statewide problem, and Charlotte's real estate prices have spiked since Hurricane Charley.

A tiered system linking the fees to the square footage of homes could help limit their effect on affordable housing, Nicholas said. Builders of smaller, more affordable homes would pay less; those who build larger homes would pay more. The tiered system is worth studying. But, as Nicholas pointed out, his report doesn't contain the data necessary to enact a tiered system.

Nicholas' report proposes that Charlotte raise impact fees 251 percent, from \$2,642 to \$9,263 on a single-family home. Nicholas acknowledged the "sticker shock" generated by such a steep one-time increase, but county officials have only themselves to blame: When Nicholas helped the county enact its last impact-fee increase in 1994, he recommended regular reviews of the fees. Those reviews were never done.

"Don't do that again," he warned the commissioners. Automated, regularly scheduled increases tied to an accepted baseline, such as the Consumer Price Index, would adjust the fees based on inflation.

The current process of raising impact fees is in the preliminary stage. Two public hearings, as yet unscheduled, should let the county receive much-needed input from the community, including the organization that represents builders and contractors.

Road impact fees represent a substantial portion of the fees -- \$6,493 -- but also are the most essential. As Nicholas pointed out, retirees don't move here to sit in a traffic jam.

A spokesman for the Bonita

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