

Tavares poised to continue impact-fee waiver

By Julia Glum, Orlando Sentinel
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TAVARES — City Council members are prepared to continue giving developers a break on impact fees until the end of the year.

Public hearings on the proposal will be held June 20 and July 18, and if approved the fee-waiver period could be extended through Dec. 31. The period is currently due to expire at the end of the month.

Extending the waiver is a good idea, said Linda Nagle, executive director of the Homebuilders Association of Lake County. "This is no time to be increasing fees or bringing back old fees in the construction industry," Nagle said. "The city of Tavares has done a marvelous job of packaging incentives that have brought in new construction, new businesses, and they've made real progress to their stated goals."

In addition to the impact-fee discussion, council members last week also explored the idea of contracting again with the Sheriff's Office to provide city 9-11 and radio-dispatch services. Such a move would reverse the city's decision in 2007 to break away from the Sheriff's Office's dispatching operation in favor of handling it in-house.

As for impact fees, last fall the council extended the waiver period through June 30. The waiver was originally instituted in late 2009 for all city impact fees associated with construction within city limits. Impact fees offset the cost new developments have on city services such as fire and police services.

For the past 29 months, permits have been approved and issued for about \$36.6 million worth of construction, according to the city. About \$1.7 million in impact fees were waived. Every dollar in impact fees waived resulted in \$21.43 of new value construction, the city said.

Tavares has enjoyed a renaissance downtown with several new restaurants and commercial buildings. But while the program has been successful, it has to end sometime, said Bill Neron, director of economic development. Council members expressed mixed opinions.

Mayor Robert Wolfe said an extension was fine, but "sooner or later, they're going to have to come back." Council members Bob Grenier and Norm Hope joined him in pushing for a definite end to the waiver.

But Kirby Smith wasn't so resolute. "We're not out of the woods yet," Smith said. "We've got to do something to try to keep the economic engine brewing. This is one of the things that has been most successful."

If passed, the ordinance would extend the fee waiver through Dec. 31, at which time council members would revisit the issue. Because the council does not have a meeting on July 4, however, there could be a roughly two-week gap between the June 30 sunset and the extension kicking in July 18, Neron said.

During that period, impact fees would be in effect.

"If somebody is in such a hurry that they have to have a permit in those two weeks, they'll have to pay impact fees," he said.

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