

July 12, 2011

Tea party activists don't keep Pasco commissioners from approving mobility fee plan

By Lee Logan, Times Staff Writer

Pasco commissioners adopt the plan after its growth concept is explained to activists.

DADE CITY - Pasco commissioners were all set to approve a major shift in transportation and growth planning. They had hashed out the details in several public meetings since February. The vote Tuesday was to be somewhat of a formality.

But they still had to face a packed crowd of angry tea party members.

Clad in matching dark blue and red shirts, the activists worried the plan would restrict freedom and force people to live in cramped urban quarters.

"We moved to Pasco County for the rural feel," said Kim Irvine, an organizer for the Tampa 9-12 project from Land O'Lakes. "We didn't want to live in a tight neighborhood with house upon house."

Irvine was one of more than 100 tea partiers, including some from neighboring Hernando, to protest the move to institute so-called "mobility fees." Other prominent objections included that the plan was a back door way to approve light rail in Pasco and that it was part of a global "Agenda 21" that was approved by the United Nations to prohibit large swaths of the globe from residency.

But commissioners were undeterred. They unanimously adopted the plan, calling it an innovative measure that will help reshape Pasco's future growth and attract office and industrial jobs.

The heart of the proposal creates higher fees in rural areas and lower fees in urban areas where officials want to focus growth. Fees would be eliminated for office and industrial businesses in urban areas to attract high-paying jobs.

The idea is to bring jobs closer to where people live and stem the flow of commuters south to Tampa and Pinellas County.

"You'll give people an opportunity not to sit and spend most of their life on highways going south," said County Administrator John Gallagher.

Pasco is likely the first local government in Florida to adopt a mobility fee and officials predicted other cities and counties would copy it.

Much of Tuesday's discussion involved trying to explain the plan to residents who had not followed the details as the plan was crafted.

"We're certainly not mandating that people live in an urban setting," said Commissioner Ted Schrader. "The choices are clearly there."

Assistant County Attorney David Goldstein, a chief architect of the mobility fee, said it would create a "menu" of lifestyle options, ranging from rural to suburban to concentrated cities.

Tuesday was the first time tea party members have openly objected to the idea.

About 50 tea party members met with Commissioner Jack Mariano on Monday night to express their concerns. He said he asked Gallagher and Goldstein to give an expanded presentation of the plan to help assuage their fears.

Goldstein specifically addressed several objections during his discussion. He noted that the plan doesn't include any new revenue source, but instead relies on property taxes from new growth to pay for transportation improvements.

He also said none of the money is set aside for light rail.

"We've excluded the costs of regional transit facilities such as light rail," Goldstein said. "Those are not part of this fee."

The transit part of the plan would only pay for buses, shelters and park-and-rides. The measure is structured to allow regional light rail to come into the county if voters approve of a way to pay for operating the system.

Goldstein noted that a sweeping growth-management law passed by the lawmakers this year specifically encouraged cities and counties to subsidize growth for preferred uses such as urban development, mixed-use neighborhoods and growth near planned transportation hubs.

He underscored that that bill passed with lopsided Republican majorities and was signed by Gov. Rick Scott.

"Apparently the only people that don't like mobility fees are Democrats," he quipped.

But many of the critics were not persuaded. Dave Miller, who lives in the Seven Springs neighborhood, said the concept of living, working and playing in the same area wouldn't work like it does in downtown Chicago or New York.

"That concept is just not viable here," he said. "People moved out of what you call traditional neighborhoods in the '50s to the suburbs because they didn't want to live there."

St. Petersburg Times



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