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Lee commishes look to aid local economy

Cool reception to developer's fee waiver idea

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Lee County commissioners began exploring ways to energize the ailing economy at a meeting Tuesday.

County Manager Don Stilwell broached the possibility of waiving impact fees, which are one-time fees of thousands of dollars the county charges to builders to pay for new roads and buildings.

"I don't, on the surface of this, think this is a good idea," said Commissioner Tammy Hall. "I would rather us look at what is our solution to maintaining a level of impact fees that does not stymie the building industry, whether we are in good times or bad times, but is fair and equitable."

The commission agreed to create a task force of county staff and building industry representatives to explore long-term solutions to energize the local economy as well as fast-track county construction projects to create jobs.

Commissioner Frank Mann said he would not support temporarily waiving impact fees because he doesn't believe it would lift the economic slump, which he blamed on financial institutions that made high-risk loans and speculative buyers.

"It wasn't caused by impact fees," he said.

But Bob Knight, president of the Lee Building Industry Association, said the county should waive impact fees for a year.

"If we sit and do nothing, we will continue to deteriorate," he said when asked about the proposal.

Unemployment hit 5.7 percent in December, up from 2.7 percent the previous year.

Fifty-seven building permits were issued in December, an 86 percent drop from last year.

"So they're not collecting any impact fees. They have nothing to lose," Knight said.

Commissioner Ray Judah said temporarily eliminating impact fees is an option.

"Anything we can do to help out the industry is something that we as a board have to take seriously," he said. "You need to frame it in a much larger, long-term approach."

Hall said a task force can examine issues such as when impact fees should be reviewed.

"If we eliminate impact fees I feel like it's a penalty to the people who have done everything right," she said.

IN OTHER BUSINESS

- Decided to continue contracting with Unique Management Services to recover overdue library materials and outstanding fines.
- Awarded a \$700,000 grant from the Federal Transit Administration to Carter & Burgess. The consulting firm will conduct a planning study on alternatives to improve transportation at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel.
- Approved the withdrawal of the county's application to the city of Fort Myers for the construction of the Justice Center parking garage at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Monroe Street to allow more time to reach a resolution with the city. The city is asking the county to agree to pay for improvements on Martin Luther King Boulevard before granting a building permit.

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Knight, also vice president of Paul Homes, doesn't think it would be unfair.

"I was selling houses a year to two years ago much higher than I do and I'm not going to have anybody come to me and say, 'Can I have some of that money back?' It's just part of timing."

To stimulate the local economy, Hall proposed the county speed up planned capital projects to create jobs.

"If we're short of staff, should we go back and look at contracting staff? That puts people to work," she said.

Commissioner Brian Bigelow said the county should accelerate the Three Oaks Parkway northern extension from Alico Road to Daniels Parkway, front cash toward the state's Metro Parkway extension from Ben C. Pratt/Six Mile Cypress Parkway to Alico and prioritize the expansion of the downtown Fort Myers library.

"We've got to be very careful," Stilwell said, noting the county already has 170 vacant positions. "I would be very embarrassed if we build a building and we can't staff it in the future."

Knight said he wasn't satisfied with the approach of expediting county projects.

"Doing a road does not require a lot of people," he said. "The true stimulus of the economy is going to be through residential housing and commercial construction."

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