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Anne Arundel council compromises on development fees

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12:16 PM EST, November 5, 2008

After nearly a yearlong impasse over whether to raise development impact fees, a divided Anne Arundel County Council voted for a compromise that will temporarily reduce fees and delay implementation until January 2011.

The 4-3 vote is designed to give county developers, builders and other businesses a chance to take advantage of lower fees -- a move that supporters hope will provide a boost, especially for the county's construction industry.

County Executive John R. Leopold, who introduced a bill to raise impact fees in January, said the vote Monday night was a major achievement for his administration.

"It has been a long haul, and we have a victory through collaboration and persistence," said Leopold, who described his mood as jubilant. "This bill allows us to invest in schools and roads that are vital to the county's economic future."

The timing of the 11th-hour vote couldn't have been better, Leopold said, because 2011 is the date when the bulk of 22,000 new military and civilian jobs will be available in and around Fort Meade in western Anne Arundel, as the result of a nationwide military base realignment.

"Clearly, residents understand that without these impact fees, they'll be subsidizing new growth," Leopold said.

Councilman Daryl Jones, a Democrat from Severn, provided the decisive vote on the council, where most had staked out their positions early on. Jones, serving his first term on the council, said the bill offered lawmakers a compromise.

"I'm concerned about the timing of this bill," Jones said. "I don't think this is the best bill, but it is a compromise."

Legislation raising the fees has been debated for nearly 10 months, scrutinized by a nationally recognized expert and reviewed by a blue ribbon citizens group headed by former County Executive Robert R. Neall.

C. Edward Middlebrooks, a Glen Burnie Republican, argued for months that fees should not be increased until the economy improves -- a plea that was heard from dozens of developers and builders who said at a series of public hearings that jobs are already being lost in the county.

"This is just another way to get through the back door what you couldn't get through the front door," Middlebrooks said. "To try to sell it as economic stimulus is outright phony."

With Anne Arundel lagging behind other counties in fees it collects from developers to cover the costs of building schools, roads, and other new services, the county has little choice but to boost its rates, supporters say.

Annapolis Democrat Joshua J. Cohen, who said he was less than satisfied with the legislation, said the fees will show results in his district, where many students attend classes in trailers.

"This bill has taken a long path from where we started, and it is not the bill I would have drafted," Cohen said. "I think we all agree that our fees are too low."

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