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Developers renegotiate fee to Aventura

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The idea was simple enough: Make developers pay an extra fee for the strain their projects would put on Aventura's transportation system.

But the planned impact fee, to be used to fund and expand the free Aventura Express shuttle bus system, hit a snag after developers ardently opposed the measure, which was passed by the Aventura Commission on first reading in January. They later sat down with the city to negotiate an alternative.

The result: a new impact fee, reduced by almost 40 percent, will be presented to the commission for final approval in April. And instead of kicking in around the middle of this year, it won't be effective until January 2009.

"I think we all appreciated the revisions to the ordinance," said Truly Burton, government affairs director for the Builders Association of South Florida. "It does remove some of the concerns."

Originally, money from the impact fee -- drafted by outside consultant James Nicholas -- would have gone into a trust fund and been used to keep the bus system running, potentially expanding it down the road. It costs about \$720,000 a year to operate the Aventura Express, half of which is paid by the county.

The city would have charged developers \$1,320 for every new dwelling; \$2,115 for every 1,000 square feet of new commercial space; and \$2,993 for every 1,000 square feet of new retail space.

The renegotiated fee is now down to \$803 per new dwelling; \$1,286 for every 1,000 square feet of new commercial space; and \$1,797 for every 1,000 square feet of new retail space. A new category, for hotels, will cost \$2,247 per 1,000 square feet.

And the use for the money has changed, too. Now, it will only go toward expanding the shuttle service -- adding buses or extending the hours of operation, for example. Developers wanted to ensure that the money collected went toward improving the city's transportation system rather than its everyday functions.

"It was done based on input with the development community," said City Manager Eric Soroka.

But that raises a new question: What happens when the bus system maxes out? That is a concern for developers, said Michael Marrero, an attorney representing Turnberry Associates.

The city should review the impact fee every three years and make sure the numbers are right and the money is still needed, Marrero said.

The new impact fee was approved by the commission at a March 20 workshop and is headed for a second and final vote at the commission's April 8 meeting.

"Everybody seems to be relatively happy," said Mayor Susan Gottlieb.

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