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Bonita Springs considers dropping road fees

Wants to encourage Old 41 development

By *MARK S. KRZOS*
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When Mayor Ben Nelson and his wife Lori open the Survey Cafe on Wilson Street in Bonita Springs on Jan. 26 they'll fork over \$15,000 in road impact fees to the city.

The next new business that opens in the area may not be saddled with such a financial burden.

On Wednesday, the Bonita Springs City Council will try to jump start Old 41's redevelopment with an incentive plan for a variety of new business owners.

The idea is to forgive road impact fees - fees the city charges to help pay for road improvements - for certain businesses that open or relocate to the heart of the city.

For example, a newly built restaurant that is 1,000 square-feet or less must pay \$20,000 in road impact fees. That fee, however, can be reduced if the restaurant goes into an existing building. The fees are charged to owners of new buildings or when there is a change of use.

Plans for redevelopment have been in the works for years, and the current proposal hasn't received unanimous support from the city council. Some council members are at odds over what types of businesses should be exempt from the fees and where the boundaries of the exemption area should be drawn.

Businesses such as retail stores, hotels, offices and restaurants would get the exemption while a stand-alone bar would not, despite the fact it would attract people to the area at night.

"When it comes to bars, you can't discriminate. You can't tell a business owner that they have to be this kind of bar or that kind of bar," Nelson said. "If you go giving them this incentive, we could shoot ourselves in the foot. We don't want it to be all bars. This is meant to be a place where you live and work."

The other issue is extending the exemption area on Old 41 from Goodwin Street north to Rosemary Drive - something city councilman John Spear is reluctant to do.

"I still think we should concentrate on the core area between Terry and Dean Street," said Spear, a land-use attorney who won't vote on the issue due to a conflict of interest with property owners Dean Street LLC and Preserve Equity LLC. "There's no question that the area north needs help too."

But Spear said the plan has always been to concentrate on the core area and then move north or south.

"You're trying to create an area where people can walk from one place to another," said Spear, adding that he thinks extending the boundary will be more than the city can handle. "Look at Fifth Avenue South in Naples. It's not a big area. It's like four or five blocks long - and it works. Then look

at downtown Fort Myers. It's spread out and it doesn't work quite as well. The further you spread things out, the shallower it gets."

The plan follows a delay in construction of Imperial Landing - a condominium, retail, restaurant and office project planned to straddle the Imperial River along the east side of Old 41.

Pulled the plug

When Antaramian Development Group of Naples pulled the plug on Imperial Landing last April, city officials and business owners wondered if redevelopment was doomed.

The city has tried to do its share:

- It installed decorative street lights.
- It improved sidewalks
- It recently widened Old 41 to four lanes north of Rosemary Drive
- It bought Imperial River Court and turned it into Riverside Park in 2004.
- It bought Bamboo Mobile Village, cleared the land and waited for a developer to come up with plans to turn it into Imperial Landing.

That developer was Antaramian, but after spending \$300,000 on the project, it pulled out citing the slumping housing market, the abundant availability of commercial space and a downturn in the economy.

"That was supposed to be the sparkplug," Nelson said of Antaramian.

When the company backed out, city officials scrambled for some new ideas.

"There wasn't a financial incentive until now," Nelson said of the impact fee exemption plan.

While Spear said market forces would dictate redevelopment north of the original Goodwin Street boundary, city council members Martha Simons and Janet Martin took exception.

"If you're going to do this, it's got to go all the way to Rosemary," Martin said this week. "We're talking about redevelopment and then people drive south on Old 41 and hit Rosemary, they'll say, 'Well, that's the same old Bonita.'"

Chip Greenwood, owner of the popular Buffalo Chips restaurant on Old 41 just south of Rosemary Drive, said anything that the city could do to revitalize the area would help.

"It's better to give businesses an advantage here than on new 41," Greenwood said. "Impact fees are all part of the cost of opening a business. That money could then be used by the owner for their advertising costs for the year."

Nelson also doesn't see extending the boundaries as a problem.

"The incentives will only be offered for three years," he said. "It's all connected and if we don't extend it to the north, those people will feel left out."

Pointing to Bonita Auto Center on the northwest corner of West Terry Street and Old 41, Nelson said if the owner of that property thinks they could close the car repair shop and build something that would be more compatible to the vision for Old 41 "such as a bed and breakfast, then we need to be able to help them out with that," he said.

Property owners may not want to make those improvements for business owners.

Needs incentive

The owner of Bonita Auto Center Joe Cassese said he would love to improve the look of his building, but without the money to do so, his hands are tied.

"How about an incentive for tenants?" Cassese asked. "As a renter, you're stuck. I can't use those funds."

Martin said the city had a storefront grant to help business owners pay for improvements to their property. The grant, which provided matching funds to business owners, was cut from the budget this year.

"Only a couple of people took advantage of it, so it was cut," Martin said. "I'd be willing to champion it again if we could get enough people to support it."

Any ideas are worth a shot, Spear said.

"If this doesn't work, the downside is we'll be exactly where we are today."

Additional Facts

if you go

What: Bonita Springs City Council discussion on exempting road impact fees for some businesses on Old U.S. 41

When: 9 a.m., Wednesday

Where: Bonita Council Chambers, 9101 Bonita Beach Road
