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Impact fees may surpass \$9,000

BY JEFF SCHWEERS
FLORIDA TODAY

VIERA - Brevard County may triple what it charges for each new house to pay for road improvements, a move developers say could cripple the construction industry that's been helping to fuel the local economy.

Commissioners have asked staff to look at raising transportation fees on new homes by almost \$3,000 -- to the full \$4,353 that a consultant five years ago told them they'd have to charge to cover the cost of building new roads today.

If approved, it would be the second major increase in growth-related fees on new construction in seven months, boosting impact fees to more than \$9,000 per house.

"We don't have a lot of money for transportation and a lot of pressing needs," Commissioner Sue Carlson said. "We need to maximize all the revenue sources available to us before we go to the taxpayer, to property taxes."

They also have asked their impact-fee consultant, Tindale-Oliver and Associates, to update the numbers in its 2000 study to reflect the current costs of growth.

Impact fees

Brevard County may add \$3,200 to the cost of a new home to help pay for growth-related needs. The \$6,205 in impact fees currently assessed on a single-family detached home in unincorporated Brevard County break down like this:

Schools \$4,445
Transportation \$1,371
Solid waste \$160
Corrections \$72
Library \$64
Fire rescue \$54
Emergency medical service \$39

Collected fees

The following shows transportation impact fee collected each fiscal year by Brevard County. Figures do not include Melbourne, Palm Bay and Titusville, which have their own transportation impact fees. Also, Cocoa Beach and Melbourne Village have no agreement with the county to collect impact fees. **1998** \$1.8 million **1999** \$2.2 million **2000** \$2.3 million **2001** \$3.9 million **2002** \$5.5 million **2003** \$6.3 million

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"Growth isn't paying for itself," Carlson said.

County staff will bring an ordinance back to the board on April 26 that also will include an increase in library services impact fee from \$64 to \$224 a house.

The new fees would take effect May 15 -- bringing the total impact fees charged on each new home to \$9,350.

That's 30 percent more than the current rate and 430 percent more than what the county charged before October, when the board began collecting an additional \$4,445 for schools on top of the existing \$1,760.

Dire warnings

Raising impact fees that much so soon would prove disastrous, said Dave Armstrong, a local builder and chairman of government affairs for the Florida Home Builders Association.

"It will kill the economic development of the county," he said.

Armstrong made the same argument in 1999 and 2000 when the board first considered raising the impact fees, and the county has had an unprecedented housing boom. Even after the county adopted the school impact fees, housing starts have continued to rise.

The impact fees also could affect decisions made in Congress about base closures, Armstrong said. The panel is looking at the availability of affordable housing in communities surrounding bases.

American Eagle has plans to build 1,000 new houses south of the base on former base housing in Satellite Beach. Those houses would be subject to impact fees.

The Local Planning Agency, a commission advisory board made up largely of developers and real estate agents, last week voted to recommend raising fees 10 percent -- or about \$137 per house.

That doesn't come close to covering the increased cost of growth, Carlson said.

"The cost of building a road has gone up," Carlson said. "I'm not sure how that's going to affect the equation."

Not enough

The county currently charges \$1,371 for transportation -- about a third of what Tindale-Oliver calculated the actual financial impact of each house was, based on things such as the average number of people per house and how many trips that family would generate.

Tindale-Oliver figured each new home built cost the county about \$4,353 in transportation impacts. But the commission five years ago hesitated to raise its 13-year-old impact fee that much in one shot, so it adopted a transportation fee that was 27.5 percent of what the consultant said was needed, and agreed to raise it 1 percent a year.

The fee is at 31 percent and doesn't generate enough money to cover road needs, officials said. The new proposal is to raise the fee to 100 percent of the

recommendation.

The county has a \$300 million list of unfunded road construction projects -- such as the Palm Bay Beltway and the Pineda Causeway extension and interchange.

Last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the county collected more than \$6.3 million in impact fees. If the rate was at 100 percent that amount would have been more than \$20 million, said County planner Steve Swanke, "so it would have tripled and then some."

Unpopular options

Other options available for transportation funding include raising the gas tax or sales tax. Commissioners would need four votes or a countywide referendum to raise the gas tax 1 cent a gallon, which would raise about \$2.5 million a year.

With the current price of gas per gallon, that wouldn't go over with voters.

Commissioners also could ask voters to raise the sales tax. An extra penny per dollar would raise about \$66 million a year.

But that might not fly, either. Voters soundly rejected a 1-cent sales tax increase in 2003, and when Carlson asked her colleagues last summer to reconsider a half-cent increase for roads only, they met it with little enthusiasm.

Carlson proposed asking voters to support a 1-cent sales tax increase for seven years to pay for \$463 million worth of road projects, some of which have been on the drawing board for more than a decade without funding.

That leaves impact fees, which have the most support among residents who know they won't be paying them.

User fee

Steve Johnson of the Viera Co., the county's largest single developer, agreed growth should pay for itself, but he'd prefer to see the county adopt a broader-based user fee that affects everyone, such as the gas tax or sales tax.

"Not that some kind of increase isn't warranted," Johnson said, "but a 350 percent increase on top of the school impact fee is getting home prices out of reach of people, especially in one year."

Brevard has been fortunate because of the home construction market helping fuel the local economy, he said. "Move too quickly and you hurt it, and then you won't collect what you're projecting because housing sales could drop."

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