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Building permit fees may rise

Faced with revenue slump, the city will consider higher fees for builders.

By JOHN DAVIS

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NORTH PORT -- A home-building slowdown that has gripped the region since late last year could lead to higher fees for building permits soon.

Local building departments that were issuing record numbers of permits in recent years are, like the home-building industry, grappling with the slowdown because they rely on permitting fees to fund their operations.

With revenues at a fraction of the level departments enjoyed in 2005, the rates builders pay for permits are likely to go up in North Port, Venice and Sarasota County soon.

North Port is leading the way.

On Monday, the City Commission will consider an ordinance to increase what it charges for the permits and inspections builders must pay for everything from wiring to plumbing to roofing.

Venice and Sarasota County plan to follow with their own hikes in the next two months, though what those increases will look like remains to be seen.

Both the county and Venice are issuing less than half the number of single-family homebuilding permits monthly they did a year ago.

Sarasota County's fee increase is supposed to go to

The cost of North Port building and construction permits:

NOW

- Plan revisions: \$25
- Standard inspection: \$0
- Electric, new construction: \$20
- Plumbing, new construction: \$20
- Gas, new construction: \$0
- Occupancy certificate, new house: \$25
- Occupancy certificate, new business: \$25

PROPOSED

- Plan revisions: \$50
- Standard inspection: \$40
- Electric, new construction: \$40
- Plumbing, new construction: \$40
- Gas, new construction: \$40
- Occupancy certificate, new house: \$100
- Occupancy certificate, new

county commissioners in May. The county issued 359 permits for single-family residences between January and March 2006. This year that number has plummeted to 155 for the same period.

business: \$100

Source: City of North Port

In Venice, just 18 new home permits were issued in the past three months, far less than half of last year's number for the same period.

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"That's what we have to live off of," said Venice Building Official Hans Behrens.

But perhaps no place best exemplifies the slowdown better than North Port.

The city issued 33 new home permits in February, by far a six-year low. In March, the level bounced back to 68, but that's still a far cry from the average of 360 a month the city granted in 2005, or the average of 172 last year. As a result, North Port's Building Department was more than \$200,000 in the red in January. The proposed increase in North Port would double the fee for plan revisions, plumbing inspections and many other services. It would be the first major overhaul of the fees in more than two decades.

Paul Morgan, of the North Port Contractors Association, which has long fought the city over impact fee increases, said the group won't fight the permit hikes because the group knows the city's Building Department is struggling.

But the increase would add to the cost of construction, he said. "This is just another increase that's going to move us out of that affordability range," Morgan said.

Commissioners in North Port have been briefed about the shortfall in the Building Department, which is now in the midst of shifting 15 jobs to other parts of the city to cut payroll.

"Considering that we haven't raised them in I don't know how many years, I think time that we re-evaluate the situation," said Commissioner Vanessa Carusone.