

CECIL WHIG

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News

It's commissioners' move in impact fee debate

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ANNAPOLIS - The local legislative delegation will wait until the Cecil County commissioners chime in before deciding what to do about an impact fee ballot question.

Commissioners President William Manlove said the board would talk about the straw ballot question and bill requests from the liquor board today, according to delegation Chairman Michael Smigiel (R-Upper Shore).

During Monday's weekly delegation meeting, Delegate David Rudolph (D-Cecil) proposed replacing a straw ballot question with legislation that would allow the county to impose an impact fee if the commissioners agree to lower a cap on the Homestead Property Tax again.

Rudolph's plan places an impact fee on new construction, directed to fund schools, coupled with a reduction from 108 percent to 107 percent on the Homestead Property Tax cap.

Last year, the county commissioners lowered the cap from 110 percent to 108 percent.

Sen. E.J. Pipkin (R-Upper Shore), who proposed the straw ballot question on impact fees, clashed with Rudolph over his legislation.

"This is a big step," Pipkin said. "We've been down this road before."

Pipkin reminded his colleagues that voters rejected transfer tax and excise tax initiatives in the past.

Rudolph argued that legislative action is needed now so the cost of new schools won't be on the backs of county residents.

Rudolph offered a second proposal. If the delegation can't agree on backing enabling legislation to replace the straw ballot question this year, he said, at least they should change the straw ballot to a referendum.

Passage of a referendum would become law, where a straw ballot is not legally binding, so the process would be sped up by a year.

Pipkin, speaking for Sen. Nancy Jacobs, said, "The senator and I don't favor impact fees at all. So the straw poll was a compromise," he said. "Frankly, the new commissioners have not approached us about wanting an impact fee."

Delegate Mary-Dulany James (D-Cecil/Harford) said Harford County adopted a transfer tax increase a few years ago that dedicated half for schools and half for agriculture preservation. Two years ago, Harford County passed enabling legislation for its county council to adopt impact fees with the revenue used for education costs.

“Our thoughts were that residents want to know where the new revenue will be spent,” James said. “If the county gets more for education from this new source of revenue, it frees up general revenue that could be spent on water and sewer projects.”

The delegation now waits on the county commissioners to see how they feel about the three options: a straw ballot, a referendum or enabling legislation.

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