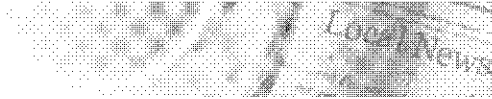


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County might suspend impact fees

By: Mark J. Crawford, Editor

January 08, 2009

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The county commission is talking about a moratorium on collecting impact fees as a way to stimulate jobs and economic growth; and moreover, it would like the city of Starke to do the same. Impact fees were approved in anticipation of a growth spurt in Bradford County and the demand that would place on infrastructure, but that growth hasn't happened. Instead, development has experienced a decline. Commissioner Eddie Lewis brought up the subject of the moratorium, saying he was looking for ways to help people in difficult economic times and encourage business and home construction. County Chairman Doyle Thomas said he agreed with the moratorium wholeheartedly.

Attorney Terry Brown said a moratorium was possible and has been discussed in other counties as well. He advised that any ordinance imposing a moratorium include a time limit for commencing construction once a permit is pulled so people cannot pull construction permits during the moratorium for building projects they don't intend to begin in the near future. Delayed construction would defeat the purpose of the moratorium, which is to spur growth and job creation now.

Pointing out that temporary suspension of the county's \$550 impact fee for a new single-family home was not much in the way of stimulus, Commissioner Ross Chandler said a moratorium wouldn't make the difference in his decision to build a new home or not. Commercial impact fees, which are based on square footage instead of individual unit, could be a different story if there was anything in the way of commercial construction taking place in the county. According to Zoning Director Nora Thompson, there has probably been just one new business constructed in unincorporated Bradford County over the last two years. Most new businesses locate inside the city limits of Starke, which has utilities as well as its own impact fee schedule.

The concept of suspending impact fees is great, Chandler said, but would be limited in its effect. Commissioner John Wayne Hersey had a somewhat different perspective. Hersey agreed \$550 wasn't much money and only amounted to 10 or so nights of dining out in today's economy. He said for the small amount of money the county is actually collecting versus the accounting headache of administering those fees, the county would be better off without them.

Impact fees are higher in the city of Starke—more than \$3,000 for a new home—and Lewis said he would also like to see the county commission send a letter to the city of Starke asking it to temporarily suspend impact fee collection as well. Thompson said an individual who recently came to pull a permit to build a new house in the city said he had to spend more than \$6,200 in impact and other city fees before he could even pull a construction permit for the home. Chamber of commerce member Tommy Tomlinson said Lewis' idea represented a good gesture for county leaders to show they are willing to "do what ever it takes" to turn the economy around. Tomlinson said the chamber intends to do what it can to attract new businesses to the community.

Thomas said one of the points made at a recent chamber visioning session was the need to create more incentives for people and industry to locate here. He said when other areas waive fees as an incentive to new businesses, local government never misses that revenue because the new business generates

revenue for the county in other ways. New businesses can lead to new residents and additional housing construction, which means more property tax money, sales tax money, etc.

Chandler said for too long the county has failed to offer real incentives. A moratorium on impact fees now is just "muddying the waters," he said. If the commission is going to do something, then it should do something that will really invite businesses—something more than just suspend impact fee collection.

"That's been my whole thing all along, but we never talk about that," Chandler said. "Again, I agree with the concept, I just don't think you're going to see that make a big difference."

Still, Lewis said it was the only thing he could come up with as a show of good faith to the public that at the same time would not cut deeply into the county's budget.

Commissioner Lila Sellars said it would show people that the county commission wants to do something to help and is starting with impact fees. "You've got to start somewhere," she said.

Thompson suggested talking to the city first since the building office has to collect and maintain the fees for the city and county.

"It's kind of hard to charge one person when you're not charging another," she said.

Thomas said he didn't think it would hurt to talk to the city about it. City commissioners are in the same position with government revenue generation being dependent on the state of the local economy.

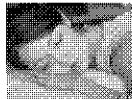
Chandler said it wasn't the county's place to ask that of the city commission. He said if the county was going to take this step, it should stand on its own.

"Hopefully that puts some pressure on them to do something," he said.

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