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County mulls additional building fees

By Pat Healy

With a goal of socking away more cash to build affordable housing, San Miguel County is considering tacking "impact fees" onto building projects in the unincorporated corners of the county.

Building a 2,000-square-foot home or business would cost an extra \$2,480, under the proposed fees. A 5,000-square-foot project would garner a fee of \$6,432. The fee for a 10,000-square-foot spread would be \$27,336.

County planners and consultants laid out the fees and the rationale behind them at a thinly attended meeting at the Telluride Fire Department Tuesday night, as the snow began to dump. People there said they supported the idea because it would funnel more money into programs to build deed-restricted homes for people who want to live and work in the county.

The idea behind the fees is this: New homes and new businesses create a need for more people to work in San Miguel County. And without funds to build affordable housing, these people would be forced to commute long distances from cheaper communities, clogging the roads.

The number of commuters in the eastern half of the county is expected to more than triple in the next eight years, said Mollye A. Wolahan, a consultant helping to implement the fee proposal.

"That will be very difficult for the county to manage," said Julie Ann Woods, another consultant working on the proposal. "That's why most communities are going to an impact fee — to find a way for the workforce to be in the local community. There's less traffic, more community vitality."

Property owners would pay the one-time fees when they filed for their building permit.

But officials said they couldn't say how much money would be generated every year, nor how many homes could be subsidized with these fees. Perhaps 10 homes per year, maybe less.

"It's just capturing a little more to give us some revenue stream," said Mike Rozycki, the county's planning director. "This may be a modest start, but you start somewhere."

San Miguel already has rules that, in certain circumstances, require builders to set

aside below-market units as employee housing. But people at Tuesday's meeting said the results have been negligible because most construction projects aren't affected.

"In 17 years, we've gotten 11 units," said county attorney Steven J. Zwick. "It's obviously not working."

If the fees are adopted, most new building projects in the unincorporated parts of San Miguel would be affected. Small homes or businesses - perhaps fewer than 1,800 square feet - could be exempt, and new deed-restricted homes would also not have to pay the fees.

New construction inside Telluride and Mountain Village wouldn't be affected.

George Harvey, a real-estate broker who attended Tuesday's meeting, said he doubted the fees would choke off any construction in the county. The proposed fees represent less than a half-percent of the average \$300 per square foot that it costs to build a house around Telluride, consultants said.

"If someone's on the line about whether they're going to be able to build or not, that fence is a lot bigger than \$2,300," Harvey said. "That's my gut feeling. I just can't imagine someone deciding to build or not to build based on that amount of money."

San Miguel County Commissioner Joan May expressed support for the new fees at Tuesday's meeting. The other two council members did not attend the meeting and could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The council has to vote whether to approve the new fees, and will not do so until at least the middle of February, after a second public meeting to discuss the idea. The next meeting is at 5:30 p.m., Feb. 13, on the second floor of the Miramonte Building.

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