

## Destin closer to a decision on doubling impact fees

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By By Fraser Sherman

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Increasing fees on single-family homes while lowering them on shopping centers is a bad way to pay for new roads, Destin City Councilor Larry Williges says.

"I find it hard to believe a single family is going to put more impact on the roads than a retail establishment of more than 100,000 square feet," Williges said at Thursday's workshop on a proposed increase in Destin's impact fees.

The council began discussing the increase — intended to cover the costs of new development's impact on roads, police and other services — in July 2007, but has yet to take a final vote.

In January, the council doubled the police impact fee, but postponed a decision on doubling the other fees until the Feb. 4 meeting, then postponed again to hold a workshop with the Local Planning Agency.

Williges asked the city's consultant, Duncan and Associates, why the proposed fee ordinance doubled transportation fees for single-family homes while retail projects would pay 67 percent less than under the old rules, or 87 percent for projects over 100,000 square feet.

Duncan's James Nicholas said the changes were based on the most up-to-date traffic studies and analysis. City Manager Greg Kisela pointed out that the Shoppes at Paradise Isle shopping center had sued the city in 2005, claiming its road fees were too high, and the city hadn't been able to prove them wrong.

Councilor James Bagby said the new transportation fees would bring in less money, which was foolish. Several local builders said so few single-family homes were being built in Destin in the current slump, it was a mistake to rely on them as a source of road funding.

At previous meetings, representatives of the Okaloosa County Building Industry Association told the council that fee increases would hurt the industry, drive development away, and weren't necessary. Some of the council members said they'd be more sympathetic if the BIA suggested alternative ways to pay for growth.

Thursday, the BIA's Skip Miller said he'd discussed alternatives with city staff but "at this point I think the council's out through the gate — it's too late in the process to bring these up." Miller said that when the council reviews fees again — something the city is supposed to do every two years — the BIA will become involved earlier, and make its case then.

Some members of the LPA said that while the new fee ordinance wasn't perfect, they could debate another six months without creating a perfect ordinance. The LPA's Shane Cannon said this at least gave the city a baseline from which it could make further changes when the next review rolled around.

Bagby said the next review should include re-evaluating the traffic manuals used and making sure their conclusions are relevant to Destin.

"Some of the studies in the manual were done in 1970," Bagby said. "They're talking about condos that are occupied about half the year ... That has no bearing on reality in this city."

The council is scheduled to make a final vote on the fees Tuesday.

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