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## Proposal would triple Charlotte County impact fees

By [Patrick Whittle](#)

CHARLOTTE COUNTY -- A proposed impact fee increase of more than 250 percent could spell the end to Charlotte County's status as the last bastion of cheap building in Southwest Florida.

The new impact fees, which the County Commission must still approve, would add \$9,263 to the cost of building a single-family home in the county. Impact fees are taxes charged on new homes and businesses to help pay for the impact of growth on services and infrastructure.

Charlotte's current fees, which total \$2,510 for a single-family home, are \$3,700 less than the state average, about \$3,000 less than Sarasota County and about \$9,000 less than Manatee County.

But they have been low for too long, county budget officer Ray Sandrock said, and higher fees are necessary to keep roads, parks and law enforcement in step with population growth. The county's road budget alone is operating at a deficit of more than \$100 million, he has said.

Building industry representatives have voiced misgivings about new fees since the county ordered an impact fee study in late summer. They fear higher fees will hurt the construction industry, inflate the cost of building and make attaining affordable housing in Charlotte even more difficult.

The County Commission could take up the issue as soon as Tuesday. County Commissioner Adam Cummings said he expects a debate, but a substantial fee hike seems inevitable.

"It's pretty well accepted that our impact fees are too low. They are not even remotely close to paying for the cost of new infrastructure that growth causes," Cummings said.

The new fees are based on a study, made public by the county Tuesday, performed by University of Florida professor James Nicholas.

Charlotte hasn't significantly increased its impact fees for single-family homes in more than 10 years, even though the county grew from fewer than 111,000 residents in 1990 to more than 157,000 last year.

Sandrock has said he expects new fees to be set before April. The county could tinker with the rates before they go to a public hearing and eventually to the County Commission for approval, he said.

"Time is of the essence," Sandrock said. "We can always make changes."

Jon Bednerik, executive officer for the Charlotte-DeSoto Building Industry Association, said he feared the new fees could place an unfair burden on new homeowners.

Association members and construction industry representatives will attend the County Commission's meeting Tuesday, Bednerik said. The association hasn't adopted a formal position on the new fees yet, but it intends to lobby in favor of affordable housing, he said.

"I think everyone is concerned that if increases are unreasonable ... the more difficult it is to find affordable housing," Bednerik said. "I don't think Charlotte County is one of those places that somehow wants to inhibit reasonable growth."

Cummings said a tiered impact fee system, which places more of the tax burden on home builders who burden infrastructure, could be an answer.

The public, builders and county commissioners will have a series of meetings to discuss the impact fees before the county sets them. Nicholas, who helped the state write some of its first impact fee laws, is expected to attend the meetings.

While the proposed new fees are already more than three times the current ones, they could grow. The proposed fees only cover roads, libraries, parks, government facilities and public safety.

Nicholas is expected to prepare another proposal for a school impact fee in the future. Charlotte, unlike Sarasota and Manatee, does not have one.

Manatee County increased its impact fees from \$3,743 to \$11,553 on Oct. 1. Manatee officials have said the increase hasn't slowed growth in their county.

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