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Editorial: Waivers must assist economy

It makes sense for St. Lucie to waive fees if results will assure financial benefits for county

By TCPalm Staff

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The economy is teetering on the edge of a potential recession; tax and insurance rates continue to dampen the housing market; property values are declining; the jobless rate in St. Lucie County is among the highest in the state, and local governments throughout Florida are scrambling to fund services demanded by residents.

Those factors are making the recruitment of new businesses — with their jobs and impact on tax base growth — especially competitive.

To become more competitive, St. Lucie County commissioners are considering a plan to waive county-imposed impact fees for certain targeted industries.

Under the proposal:

- Each waiver would require approval by the County Commission.
- Only industries targeted by the state as especially attractive to the economy would be eligible.
- Businesses must create a minimum of 10 new jobs or have a 10 percent increase in existing employment.
- Salaries (not including the top two executive salaries) must be at least 107 percent of the county's average, or the average wage and the business contributing \$10 million or more in construction investment.
- Businesses must provide health insurance and remain in the county at least 10 years.
- The waiver will depend on the salaries of jobs created or the amount of money the company will invest in the county. The impact fee waivers would start at \$3,500 per job created or 40 percent of total county impact fees.

As commissioners prepare to consider the waiver program on Jan. 15, some protections must be provided to the county and its taxpayers.

Among those provisions needed:

- The company must post a bond or otherwise be required to refund the county should any part of the agreement not be met.
- It must be clear that waivers will be at the sole discretion of commissioners without appeal by any company seeking a waiver.
- Companies must prove they meet terms of the agreement rather than the county having to prove they are not meeting the terms.
- Provisions must be included for potential bankruptcy declarations by any business awarded waivers.

The bottom line is that any deals must be to the advantage of the companies and, most importantly, to the advantage of St. Lucie County taxpayers.

If those provisions can be met, commissioners should approve the waiver program to spur economic growth and jobs for the community.



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