

Commission mulls impact fees

By Tracy Whirls

The Glades County Board of County Commissioners will join their counterparts from Hendry County and LaBelle commissioners in a workshop with the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) to discuss growth management, comprehensive planning and related issues tomorrow, Feb. 18 at the LaBelle Civic Center, 481 West Hickapoochee, LaBelle, from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

County Manager Jim Smith told the commission at their regular meeting Feb. 8 that the DCA is concerned that in the area of North LaBelle and Muse, growth projections are out of sync with historical data and the department is concerned about infrastructure needs of the area.

Commission Vice Chairman Alvin Ward said after meeting with Hendry County engineer Rock Aboujaoude, plans call for a new four-lane bridge in West LaBelle since Bonita Bay recently purchased property on the Lee/Hendry County line.

"Glades County needs to take the initiative and look at impact fees. We don't have to take the entire county," Commissioner Ward said, "but if we wait till the growth comes, the infrastructure's just not going to be there."

Commissioner Russell Echols appeared to agree, asserting earlier in the meeting that if changes must be made to the county's existing comprehensive plan, land development regulations and other regulatory documents to accommodate growth, the county must figure out a way to do it.

"We're so far behind the curve," Mr. Echols said.

Commissioner Ward expressed concern that the state might not approve any growth in the area until Hendry and Glades Counties show they can support growth in the area.

County Manager Jim Smith agreed, adding that in speaking with Mike McDaniels, of the DCA, the department is concerned about how the region will pay for road, water and sewer impacts.

Commission Chairman Butch Jones said he and county finance director Brenda Chosen had collected studies from both Hendry and Okeechobee counties in researching how to approach imposing impact fees in Glades County.

County Attorney Richard Pringle said the problem is that the fees have to be supported by data, and generating the data is likely to cost upwards of \$50,000, which is what Hendry County paid for their study.

Commissioner Paul Beck said the commission should convene a meeting to look at the county's existing tax structure and move forward with creating a Municipal Services Taxing Unit, or MSTU to fund the sheriff's office, so the county would have sufficient money in the general fund to cover impact fee studies and other issues.