



## County OKs Impact Fee Committee

By [Jim Konkoly](#) of Highlands Today

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SEBRING — The Highlands County commissioners have decided to appoint a citizens review committee to give them advice on whether to raise, lower, suspend or even replace impact fees as a way to finance infrastructure.

But how that committee will be chosen and what special interest groups it will represent remain far from settled.

The big divide on how to constitute this committee became apparent at Tuesday's commissioners meeting, when commissioners Barbara Stewart and Guy Maxcy put forth opposing views.

Stewart said she wants the county commission to pick the various interest groups — such as builders, Realtors, developers, homeowners, taxpayers and city and school officials — that will be represented. Then, she said, each of those groups could name their own representative to the committee.

"We need to be careful about groups," Maxcy responded. "We don't want this to be a political committee."

Maxcy explained that if various interest groups all have a seat on this committee, that could "pit the groups against each other." For example, builders may want impact fees reduced or even suspended, while school officials may want higher impact fees to boost school funding.

To prevent that type of conflict on the committee, Maxcy said, the commissioners should simply name individuals to the committee who would make up "a good cross section of the county."

Stewart said that approach won't fly, because it would anger the builders, developers and the Highlands County Economic Development Commission.

Commissioners wouldn't even be forming a citizens advisory committee on impact fees, she said, if it wasn't for the builders, the developers and the EDC, who asked for such a committee.

"Those are the three groups that have been pushing this," Stewart said.

Edgar Stokes, in his second month as chairman of the commissioners, sided with Stewart's approach. Commissioners should name the interest or constituent groups that will be on this committee and then let those groups pick their representative, he said.

Stewart said the committee also should have one or more "typical citizens and typical taxpayers." People

picked to represent that "group," she said, should be "informed and involved citizens."

Maxcy said environmentalists should be represented on the impact fee committee, and that representatives of this special interest should probably come from the county's Natural Resource Advisory Council.

Nothing was settled for sure Tuesday, except that commissioners will continue work toward forming the committee at their next meeting.

Commissioner Don Bates drew a few chuckles from his colleagues on the county commission and people in the audience when he said, "I get the feeling that committee formation is not one of our strengths."

Stokes, though, asked commissioners to come back next week with the names of groups or interests that should be represented on this committee.

"I think we have a start here," he said, "and we'll contact all these groups and associations and go from there."

Maxcy kicked off talk about a citizens committee to make recommendations on the future of impact fees last year, but nothing was done until the request to act came from the EDC last week.

Maxcy said his original idea was to make sure impact fees are fair. He also said such a committee could look into whether there is a better alternative to impact fees, in which case they could be abolished.

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