



## Impact Fee Suspension: Committee To Give Its 'Yes' Or 'No'

By [Jim Konkoly](#) of Highlands Today

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SEBRING — By 11 a.m. today, the 11-member Highlands County Citizens Advisory Committee on Impact Fees should have a recommendation on whether county commissioners should temporarily suspend impact fees for six months.

Jack Richie, committee chairman, said the meeting will start promptly at 9:30 a.m. and end no later than 11 a.m.

In those 90 minutes, Richie said Thursday, committee members should decide on a clear message to send the county commissioners regarding impact fees.

The committee was appointed to represent 11 divergent and sometimes opposing interests when it comes to impact fees, such as builders and developers as well as environmentalists and municipalities. Even with that composition of the committee, Richie said he is confident the 11 members will come to a definite decision.

County Commissioner Guy Maxcy's proposal to suspend impact fees, necessary to pay for infrastructure caused by growth, has drawn both praise and criticism.

Because commissioners must make a decision on Maxcy's plan soon, Richie said, he called this special meeting of the advisory committee, which was created and appointed by the county commissioners.

"The way things are going," Richie said, "I feel we have to look at the best numbers and the best information available and make a recommendation."

While Maxcy's plan to stimulate the troubled home-building industry has some positives, Richie said, "you have to do more than just want to help a good group of folks. You also have to find out what are the other results if you go ahead with this."

Richie has invited Carlton Hodges, a Polk County resident considered to be an expert on the impact fee issue, to the meeting.

"Commissioner Don Bates met with him before the commissioners created the impact fee advisory committee, and I met with him before our first (committee) meeting," Richie said. "He has a tremendous knowledge about and background in the impact fee issue."

Hodges was not invited as a guest speaker, but has agreed to be there to answer questions from committee members.

Richie said the suspension of impact fees is "a very difficult thing to deal with, because there are so many factions involved and they each want to satisfy their own needs which, in my opinion, you can't blame them for."

For example, most builders want to suspend impact fees, claiming it's vital to put their work crews back to work. Meanwhile, Richie said, many Realtors don't want the county to encourage new-home building because they make no money off that, and they have more than 4,000 homes for sale in a horrible real estate market.

"But," Richie added, "I believe we will have a recommendation for the commissioners at the end of the meeting."

From his perspective, Richie said he believes that builders, bankers and real estate sales people all contributed to the current problems in the housing industry in Highlands County, throughout Florida and in every area of the United States.

"They all encouraged 'flipping,'" he said, referring to the practice of selling a home or a home lot three or four times within 18 months, with the price escalating wildly upward with each new sale.

Many sales presentations by real estate sales people were based on "flipping," Richie said. "And the builders and the developers over built," he said, to cash in on the sizzling boom market. That type of boom had to end up sooner or later in a bust, he said.

No matter whether committee members agree or disagree with his assessment, Richie said, they all believe they must make a firm recommendation and the commissioners have to make a decision soon, one way or the other.

The longer the commissioners delay a yes-or-no vote on suspending impact fees, the longer the builders and home buyers will stay out of the market, he said.

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