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## GOVERNMENT

### Impact fee debate is \$5 million question

Revenue estimate gives councilmen pause on eve of vote

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer

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The joke told around the County Council chambers these days is that children are conceived and brought into the world faster than officials forged a compromise in the impact fee debate.

But as tomorrow's deadline approaches, the compromise appears to be unraveling and some believe the next generation of children will begin walking and talking

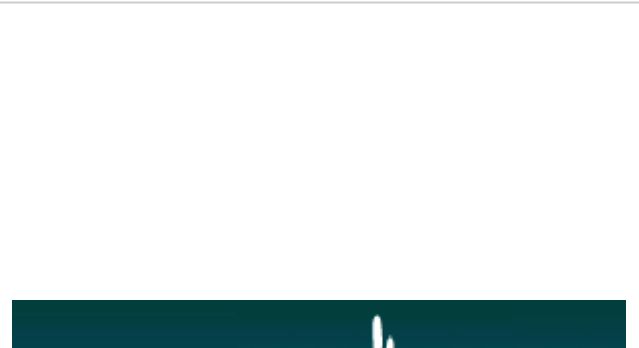


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before any meaningful deal is struck.

To supporters, the health of the county's infrastructure is at stake. To those against the deal, this plan sacrifices too much for too little gain.

County Auditor Teresa Sutherland this week calculated that the compromise would cost the county \$5.5 million over the next two years. The revelation prompted more doubts in the minds of the two councilmen who say they're undecided on whether to vote for the bill, which is expected to fail without support from one of them.

"We're going to lose money," said Councilman Jamie Benoit, D-Crownsville, adding that in the current economic climate, that's "just not the right thing to do."

"When you're in an economy as pressed as this one, and when you're in a county that needs money the way we do, it's a very difficult decision to walk away from \$5 million," said Councilman Daryl Jones, D-Severn.

Councilmen, policy makers and many developers agree Anne Arundel's impact fees are set too low, making the gap too large between what developers pay to expand schools, roads and public safety buildings and the actual cost to build them.

The county administration and the council have debated how much and how quickly to increase the fees since January, employing a nationally renown expert, assembling a team of citizen volunteers, and logging weeks in staff time to sort out the details.

Last month, the council approved a compromise that would lower fees for a year, bring them back to their current level for a year, then increase them in 2011 to an amount more than double the



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current rate. The idea was promoted as an "economic stimulus" to save construction jobs, and set the final fees at rates that would generate an extra \$9.9 million when in full effect, according to Ms. Sutherland's calculations.

But as that debate comes to a final vote at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the Arundel Center in Annapolis, Mr. Benoit and Mr. Jones are hesitant to sign on. Others don't believe the decline in revenue is large enough to abandon a solution to a problem that everyone agrees need to be solved.

"I don't think (the drop) is significant enough not to go forward with this compromise," said Councilman Ed Reilly, R-Crofton, one of the bill's three co-sponsors.

Meanwhile, County Budget Officer John Hammond said Ms. Sutherland's figures are "a little bit overblown" because they're partly based on the assumption that the building industry will keep the same pace it had during the last fiscal year.

"In reality, there is not as much building and activity going on in fiscal year 2009" which began in July and ends June 2009, Mr. Hammond said. "Realistically, it's not in the cards."

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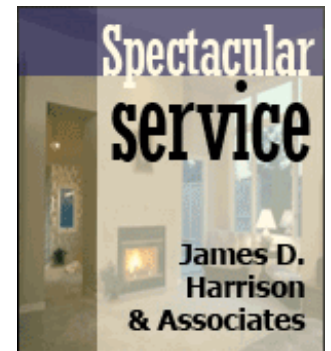
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### Impact Fees Need to Go Up

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The two quoted councilmen are missing the point of the impact fee bill. Impact fee revenue that will be lost by NOT passing this bill over the next 3+ years will be in the 10's of millions. The short first year break will not have that much effect because it will be a short FY that ends in June 2009. This impact fee bill, if it is not passed, is an even larger gift to the developers than the exaggerated perception of the first year impact fee break would cost due to the slowed economy we are in right now. Now is the time to pass this bill. Benoit and Jones need to vote FOR this impact fee bill now and not punt the ball over a weak argument into the next council election cycle where nothing

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...will get done. Much good work was performed by the council committee to get the bill to where it is now. The council members even voted for the amendment but now don't think its the right thing to do? Was that just a stall tactic or sincere interest in getting a bill passed? Gentlemen, please place the residents needs back in the front seat instead of developer wants. West county stands to be the county's biggest loser if this bill is not passed. Negative political results in the next council elections will be likely if infrastructure needs are not addressed in West County with an impact fee increase to pay for BRAC and other growth that is coming.

*Tim Reyburn - Laurel, MD*

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