

Impact fee discussion set; County invites LaBelle, Clewiston to workshop May 17

By Patty Brant

Anticipating unprecedented growth over the next few years, local government has been exploring the use of impact fees, paid by new residents and businesses, to pay for that growth. Road impact fees are the first to be considered. Others are likely to be considered to support additional schools and emergency services later.

The county, City of LaBelle and City of Clewiston have all expressed their acceptance of impact fees as a means for development to help pay its own way. In fact, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) sees impact fees as a vital component in planning for growth. Road impact fees have been the first to be discussed. However, there has been an impasse over the levels needed. The county and City of Clewiston basically approving fees suggested by Dr. Jim Nichols, University of Florida.

The City of LaBelle, however, has held out for a restructuring of these fees, particularly as they apply to business. The city commission fears the schedule is set too high and will actually deter desirable businesses from locating here.

LaBelle has now submitted its suggestions to the county, including a grace period of six-to-nine months before impact fees are implemented. Collection would then be graduated, beginning at 50 percent of the recommended rate; followed by 75 percent; then the full amounts by about January 2007. The city would also like to apply "trip length" methodology to residential impact fee structures. In addition, LaBelle also wants to reevaluate some of the higher suggested impact fees, especially those which exceed rates in neighboring Lee County.

LaBelle's plan would allow for delayed payments for several years and implementation of an Economic Development Council rebate program to offset impact fees for new businesses generating jobs with salaries above the mean and to craft a benefit package utilizing the Enterprise Zone.

The City of LaBelle can opt to set its own impact fee rates independent of the county. However, the Department of Community Affairs does not recommend it, since it would create disparities between local governmental entities.

The county commission has invited representatives of both LaBelle and Clewiston to a workshop to discuss impact fees at 2 p.m. Tuesday, May 17, in Clewiston.

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