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Polk commission

Impact Fees May Change Once More

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BARTOW | The Polk County Commission on Tuesday agreed to consider a proposal that could return some impact fees to levels before April when they were cut 50 percent, with some going slightly higher.

The decision to revisit the impact fees just two months after cutting them came at a commission workshop to review a study by Duncan Associates, an Austin, Texas, growth management consultant. The study was done under a state law requiring a review of local impact fees every three years.

The commission agreed to consider revising impact fees on parks and recreation, libraries, fire protection, ambulance services, law enforcement and jails after a June 17 public hearing.

Commissioners could decide to keep the current rates, to raise them to the maximum allowed by law or to set rates somewhere in between.

County Manager Michael Herr said in an e-mail to The Ledger that he favors keeping the rates unchanged.

"Adopting 100 percent of what can be charged legally under the study may be too much for local businesses to handle. It may be best to leave the fees the same right now until our local economy picks back up," Herr said.

"Hopefully banks will loosen up credit to loan new money to small businesses (creating) some new jobs, and we can get our housing market back on track in Polk County."

If commissioners want to raise the impact fees, they may have to act before July 1, when a new state law would ban any increases until July 1, 2011, said County Attorney Michael Craig. The Legislature passed the bill earlier this year, but Gov. Charlie Crist has not yet signed it.

The Duncan Associates study determined the commission could raise some impact fees, such as parks and recreation, as high as \$485 for a single-family home, higher than the \$456 charged before the 50 percent cut, which brought it down to \$228.

Some fees, such as ambulance services, could rise to maximum \$53 for a single-family home, a rise of \$4 from the current fee of \$49. It was \$99 per home before April.

If the commission chose to go to the maximum rates in all six categories, the impact fees for a new single-family home would total \$1,399 in fees, about the same as the \$1,403 charged before April but double the current \$699, the study shows.

That included fees for parks and recreation, and libraries that commercial properties do not pay.

Total impact fees per 1,000 square feet of a new retail structure could increase to a maximum \$1,315, down from \$1,720 before April but 53 percent higher than the current \$860.

For 1,000 square feet of office space, the impact-fee total could reach \$1,356, down from \$1,960 before April but a 38 percent increase from the current \$980.

The county could charge fees for 1,000 square feet of industrial structures totaling up to \$163, down from \$190 previously but nearly 72 percent higher than the current \$95 total.

The various fees are based on how much actual use - ambulance calls, for example - comes out of each land use classification, said Clancy Mullen, executive vice president at Duncan Associates, who presented the report.

The commission voted 4-1 in March for the 50 percent cut in the six fees to stimulate new development in the county in the wake of last year's economic collapse.

Several commissioners indicated they still see the need for such a break.

"Somebody's going to have to convince me to go to 100 percent simply because of the economy. I don't think there's the ability to pay yet," Chairman Samuel Johnson said.

But Commissioner Jean Reed, who voted against the cut in March, said she favored going to the maximum rates but targeting impact-fee reductions for some new development, such as "green," or environmentally friendly, buildings.

Mullen said he didn't know of any green impact-fee incentives in Florida and that defining the category could prove difficult.

At Commissioner Randy Wilkinson's request, Herr said he would include for consideration next month changing the mandatory connection fees for county water and sewer services.

Wilkinson said he might favor setting impact fees for parks and recreation, libraries, fire protection, ambulance services, law enforcement, and jails at about 75 percent of the maximum rates if combined with decreases in the utility charges, which could represent a bigger savings for new development.

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