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Indian River County Commission approves impact-fee increase

By Henry Stephens
staff writer

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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — On Tuesday, a Stuart economist faulted Indian River County's study of proposed impact fees, a year in the making, with having inaccurate calculations of the amount of park land, sheriff's deputies or other services per resident.

But Kirk Sorenson failed to convince the County Commission to delay passage of the fees for 30 days while he could study the true level of service.

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"You were only here a couple of weeks ago and you're saying we're rushing (the fees)?" Vice Chairman At Neuberger asked.

Neuberger won a 5-0 vote on his motion to approve on first reading a series of proposed impact fees — which could add about \$7,000 to the price of a new home — to offset increased demands on jail space, landfill space, parks, schools, libraries, public buildings, fire rescue and law enforcement.

The final vote, however, is set for the May 17 meeting.

Sorenson, representing the Treasure Coast Builders' Association, said the calculations by the county consultant, Tindale-Oliver & Associates of Orlando, count only permanent residents, not winter residents, and thus fall short of the county's own Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

Including the seasonal or peak population, he said, could reduce the impact fees by as much as 20 percent because the service levels would be spread over more people.

"The fees could go down," Tindale-Oliver Vice President Bob Wallace conceded.

Wallace said he would work with Sorenson and county planners through the next week to determine if there really is a difference in impact fees if calculated based on the different population bases.

While county officials have been discussing the proposed fees since December 2003, Sorenson said he got a copy of the county's report only two weeks ago.

Sorenson made his first appearance in the matter on Thursday, when the Planning and Zoning

Commission considered the fees.

"This guy charged in and said he needed more time," County Administrator Joe Baird said. "They (builders) hired him late. That's their problem."

Smuggler's Cove resident John Williams and Linda Bolton, president of the Indian River Neighborhood Association, were the only two out of six speakers to support the fees.

They echoed the argument in prior discussions that impact fees spare current residents while making new residents pay for the expanded services they will need.

But Vero Beach Realtor Chip Landers also echoed the critics' stand that builders will pass the fees to the buyers, increasing the price of homes and making it harder than ever for first-time homebuyers to break into the market.

Wallace's firm has calculated the county will need \$203 million to maintain current service levels through 2025.

The consultant's study assumes the county population will climb as projected from 126,796 now to 175,400 in 20 years.

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