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Lee swoon has government workers in grip

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It's not just Lee County's building department; other branches of county services can't avoid the housing crash fallout.

Parks and Recreation has 26 vacancies within the 250-person department and director John Yarbrough said he has self-imposed a hiring freeze. This comes about a week after the building department cut 29 jobs because of lower impact fee revenue caused by a housing construction slowdown.

To prepare for lower property tax revenues next budget year, Yarbrough said he will need to consider halting recreational activities, programs or facilities, although he declined to name any that will be considered for cuts.

"It is something we are going to be working on in the next month and the soonest we will have any ideas will be four to six weeks," Yarbrough said.

Parks depend on impact fees for projects. The fees are one-time bills on new construction to defray cost of providing and expanding services and facilities that benefit new development.

"So some of the projects that don't have specific funding that we were counting on impact fees to continue, will be delayed," Yarbrough said.

In 2005 the parks department collected $10.2 million for community parks. In 2007 it took in $3.5 million. The impact fee deficiency has stalled some projects, such as completion of Wa-Ke Hatchee Recreation Center. Construction on the $12 million park with ball fields, a playground and dog park was set for groundbreaking last month.

"I know it is tough times for everybody and it is amazing how many different people and industries it affects," Yarbrough said of the downturn.

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