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## Lee commissioners, builders to return to impact fee issue

BY RYAN LENGERICH

*rlengerich@news-press.com*

A top local building industry official said if Lee County commissioners wait months for a study before slashing impact fees, it essentially creates a building moratorium.

A Lee County official, however, said if builders stop pulling permits, it's the industry's reaction to its own inflated expectations.

Commissioners on Feb. 26 put off a decision on whether to eliminate or decrease impact fees as a way to stimulate the local economy, asking staff to report back in two weeks with more information. Staff will address commission at a meeting Tuesday.

A memo sent Wednesday to commissioners from Mary Gibbs, director of Community Development, said the county could expedite a study of road impact fees, the most expensive type. It could be late August or September before the study is completed and commissioners can act on it.

Bob Knight, president of Lee Building Industry Association and co-owner of Paul Homes, said waiting until September would amount to a moratorium. Builders, he said, will just wait out the study.

"Commercial (construction) — it is going to shut it down," Knight said.

Joan LaGuardia, community development spokeswoman, said builders approached the county with the idea to reconsider the fees. The county listened, and builders sensed hope.

"It is something they created. They created this expectation of some type of change happening by bringing this forward," LaGuardia said. "If this creates the expectation out there that something might change so lets wait, that's not a moratorium."

Impact fees are one-time charges on new construction for the cost of providing and expanding services and facilities that benefit a development. The county collects road, park, emergency services and school impact fees, which can add tens of thousands of dollars to a commercial project.

The fees don't pay for operation costs such as repairs.

Builders said a reduction or elimination will boost the commercial, and to some extent, housing markets. Knight said the commission should accelerate the study and roll back the road impact fee in the interim until a final figure is established later.

In February 2007, the county increased road fees from almost \$3,000 to almost \$9,000 for a single-family home.

A builder is charged almost \$15,000 in total impact fees for a single-family home. Commercial space is charged by the square foot. It costs \$24,000 for each 1,000 square feet of medical office space, the most expensive category.

LaGuardia said there's no forgone conclusion the study will show road fees should come down. And expediting the road fee study would either postpone the Fire/EMS Impact Fee study or force the county to pay for two studies at once.

"It is not as easy as everybody wants to say it is," LaGuardia said.

Commissioner Tammy Hall has championed a reduction in road fees, the most expensive type. Other commissioners are not convinced it will benefit the economy, but will drain already slumping coffers. Rolling back road fees to previous levels would cost the county \$6.7 million in over one year, according to county estimates.

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