

Naples Daily News

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Editorial: Impact fees

Legislators must see bills will lead to moratoriums

By The Naples Daily News

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Collier County government officials used the "M" word this past week to send a warning to Tallahassee, where a number of builder-friendly legislators are pushing new laws governing impact fees.

Moratorium, as in building moratorium, is seldom uttered in polite conversation in Southwest Florida governmental circles.

As with most strong language, the word is used sparingly and with great care.

But, on Tuesday, during the regular commission meeting, the "M" word was center stage.

Blame two proposed pieces of legislation: House Bill 1173 and Senate Bill 2302.

In tandem, the bills would redefine when and how impact fees can be collected by local governments, which are charged with building schools, fire stations, roads, water lines and other infrastructure to keep pace with growth. The bills were crafted with the help of the development industry, which often argues that impact fees are excessive and unfairly levied.

Excessive? Unfair?

Hardly.

If anything, the fees on new homes and businesses are too low if growth is truly going to pay for growth.

"If this passes," said Joe Schmitt, the county's community development director, "I will be making a proposal to go into some type of moratorium."

Commission Chairman Fred Coyle agreed that a moratorium on new construction would be inevitable if legislation waters down the county's ability to collect proper impact fees.

"All of the commissioners are violently opposed to this legislation and that includes me," Coyle said. "It guts our growth-management plan."

And, all the commissioners agreed that a moratorium could spawn any number of plagues, including higher property taxes, even "soup lines."

The most visible backers of the proposed legislation are Sen. Michael Bennett of Bradenton and representatives of the Florida Home Builders Association. They say a new law is needed to make fees consistent from county to county and to make the collection of the fees less onerous for developers.

The home-builder lobby might not have been prepared for such a vitriolic response from Collier County's elected officials. It wasn't all that long ago in Southwest Florida that the term "impact fee" was as cautiously avoided as "moratorium."

The establishment of impact fees, their timely collection and their frequent recalculation to keep pace with infrastructure costs haven't come without struggle.

Based on the sentiments expressed Tuesday in commission chambers, the idea that growth must truly pay for growth is no longer a debatable issue in Collier County.

That's a good thing. It signals progress.

The County Commission was unanimous Tuesday in its condemnation of the legislation proposed by builders. Our elected representatives in Tallahassee should be as well.

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