



## NEWS

### Impact fee study delayed again

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Impact fees have been on and off the table since 2005. Now it will be at least a year before the second phase of a study on impact fees begins. Lumpkin County Board of Commissioners voted to delay the study on the recommendation of the impact fee committee, despite the fact money was set aside in the 2007 budget for the project.

The board began discussing impact fees early in 2005. It wasn't until October of that year that a committee to research the topic was formed, with District 1 Commissioner John Raber as chairman. After hearing presentations from two experts in the field and learning that an expensive capital improvement plan was the first step in the process, the committee was disbanded until funding could be obtained.

Money was set aside in the 2007 budget. A public facilities assessment summary was completed in November 2007 by Ross & Associates, recommending the county go forward with an impact fee study including library, fire protection, sheriff's office, parks and roads.

The board suggested at that time a public meeting on the capital improvement aspect be held after the committee had a chance to discuss the report. Since then, the Raber has had a difficult time finding enough committee members to have a quorum.

Earlier this month Raber and five members of the 10-member committee met, voting four to one to delay any further work toward implementing impact fees. The current downturn in the economy appears to be the reason for the decision.

Pete Burchette was the sole dissenting vote.

"Implementation of impact fees is a lengthy process. It will probably take a year or two," he said. "I think we need to start now rather than wait to look at this again, so when the economy improves we will be in a position to move forward."

Burchette added that he does not think impact fees by themselves are the answer to the county's future revenue needs.

"They are just one piece of the puzzle needed for the dollars necessary in the future to build infrastructure and provide services. For instance, most would agree our roads need work, and more roads will be needed in the future. Impact fees can be used for roads, but the county must have a repaving plan first. The commissioners told me we don't have a plan because we have no money for one. It's a catch-22. Where's the money ever going to come from?"

Voting to suspend work on the study were Greg Hayes, Bill Martin, Clarence Stowers and Jack Whidby.

Whidby could not be reached for comment, but Hayes, Martin and Stowers all expressed their belief that now is not the time for impact fees.

"If we were selling 1,000 or 1,200 permits a year, it would make sense," said Hayes, "but the number of permits we are selling now-a little more than 300 a year-won't support what it will cost to implement them."

"We would have to add additional people to the county payroll for administration of impact fees, and the taxpayers will have to pick up the tab, until it gets to the point it can fund itself, if it ever does. There also have to be capital improvements done before the money can be spent on some projects. Do the math. Look at the number of permits for the last year," he said. "There are a few individuals that seem to paint this glorious picture of what impact fees can do, but that's just not going to happen. It's not just a big chunk of money, something you can use as you please."

Hayes pointed out that impact fees could not be used for the library, for instance, until it met certain state standards, such as ratio of square feet and number of books per person. The same goes for parks and other facilities.

"It would cost us a lot to bring everything up to par before we can even use impact fees," he said.

Hayes is also concerned about the blow impact fees could be for the small independent builder. "We are already cutting costs just to sell houses and keep people working," he said. "Any extra costs right now could put people out of work."

Stowers agreed that the timing is not right.

"A lot of north Georgia counties implemented impact fees several years ago during a peak growth period. Now we're not growing like we were, and who knows when the economy will pick up."

All three also voiced concerns that the city of Dahlonega is not on board. The city has two representatives on the committee, city councilman Michael Clemons and citizen Sam Johnson. Neither attended the committee's last two meetings.

"If the city is not on board we'll have a whole new wave of annexations, and that will really impact the county in a negative way," Hayes said.

All three also agreed there are alternatives to impact fees the county could and should implement. Martin made a motion to consider increasing development fees, taking into consideration other counties' fee structures.

"Our development fees are minimal," he said.

The committee voted unanimously to recommend an increase in fees to the BOC.

"Increasing development fees for subdivisions won't hurt the small builder. Developers can more easily pass along the added cost. I think that would help more than impact fees and the county wouldn't have the added expense of administration," Hayes said.

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