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On paper, the solution to St. Johns County's desire to increase its commercial tax base is simple and is proposed as two options: A) Reduce the impact fees on commercial construction and increase residential fees by approximately 32 percent, or B) keep residential fees the same as they are currently and reduce commercial fees by an additional 25 percent from Option A.

Those are the two options offered by James C. Nicholas Ph.D., the county's longtime impact fee consultant.

Impact fees, though controversial with developers and builders, are designed to help pay for the impacts new construction brings to roads, parks, public safety, public buildings and public schools. State law requires that they be updated every five years to balance development fees in relation to costs of public services and facilities.

This year's discussion is taking place at a time when the economy is still in decline, property tax revenues are not going up. Commercial properties represent only 11 percent of the county's tax base, a number all would like increased. Population growth demands more services but provides less in new taxes. St. Johns County is one of the state's fastest-growing counties population-wise and administrators realize the need to encourage new commercial development here. If you are like us, impact fees are not top-of-mind unless they affect you directly. But these fees affect all those government services we take for granted and, as a result, our quality of life. New commercial development reduces the burden on residential fees to pay for services.

Tuesday, the County Commission will discuss future impact fees to become effective Oct. 1. The School Board will also hold its own workshop this week. On the School District side, property tax declines have also cut into programs, teachers, staff, and facilities maintenance. Impact fees help fund school construction. The School Board will make its recommendation to the County Commission by February 11. After a public hearing, on March 1, the County Commission will make the final decision on impact fees.

Commercial growth needs a boost and will give the county a brighter future. We support Nicholas's option B: Keep residential fees level and reduce commercial impact fees an additional 25 percent. We're assured by county administrators that even with the

additional reductions in fees for commercial development, we'll be provided with adequate services and an excellent quality of life in St. Johns County.

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