



March 4, 2009

Our views: Not so fast

Brevard taxpayers deserve voice in move to lift commercial impact fees

County commissioners should put the brakes on a rush move to waive commercial impact fees for two years due to the stalled economy.

The board voted unanimously last week to put a moratorium on four fees that have been collected since 1989.

The money goes to fix roads and to help pay for capital improvement projects for the county's fire-rescue, emergency medical and corrections departments, such as for vehicles or new fire stations.

The deal could be sealed in an emergency vote Thursday, if four of five commissioners give approval for the moratorium.

But they should slow down, give the decision greater scrutiny and allow taxpayers to have a say in what happens next.

Granted Brevard's economy is suffering badly, with construction near a standstill.

And there may be justification for a temporary halt to the fees, which some commissioners say might spur new construction and jobs.

Need public hearings

But rushing through an emergency ordinance that short-circuits the normal vetting process — including public hearings where citizens can speak up — is not the way to go.

Among our concerns:

- Solid numbers on the consequences of waiving the fees — especially for transportation projects that could be delayed — are hard to pin down.

The county took in about \$5.8 million in commercial and residential impact fees combined last year, a number it probably wouldn't match for the next fiscal year because of slowed construction.

Nonetheless, projects slated for Barnes Boulevard in Rockledge and Wickham Road, NASA Boulevard and Ellis Road in Melbourne are among those that could be affected if fees are lifted.

Keep in mind the county already has a \$400 million backlog in unmet road needs, so every dime for improvements is direly needed.

And that Brevard County is staring down a \$20 million to \$40 million budget gap for 2009, meaning even small fees collected to shore up fire-rescue, emergency medical and corrections coffers shouldn't be tossed without intense scrutiny either.

- Lifting impact fees now could be just the camel's nose under the tent.

The proposed moratorium is supposed to sunset after two years. But we can virtually guarantee that commissioners who get hefty campaign donations from developers will bang the drum then to toss

the impact fees for good.

That can't be allowed to happen.

Space Coast taxpayers have made it clear during the boom years that they want growth to pay for itself as much as possible — because otherwise they get stuck with bills for roads, schools and infrastructure.

Impact fees fair

Impact fees are a fair way to make sure that happens and to stave off even more gridlock on our roads or a decline in public safety in Brevard, including at the jail.

The same moves to roll back smart-growth safeguards are under way in Tallahassee, where development-friendly legislators are using the recession as cover to push to ease growth management and environmental laws citizens want to control what happens in their communities.

Brevard residents deserve the chance to study the costs and consequences of any impact-fee moratorium before a ruling comes down from on high.

That's why commissioners should turn down the emergency waiver Thursday and follow the standard process of holding public hearings over several months before deciding whether to ax the fees.
