

Archives Article View

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Transportation impact fee stays as is

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PINELLAS COUNTY – Despite increases in construction costs of 21 percent, the Board of County Commissioners voted 6-1 on Jan. 22 to leave the county's transportation impact fees as they are.

Commissioner Robert Stewart voted no.

A county ordinance requires that the TIF be reviewed every two years to determine if the fees should be modified based on changes in the cost of construction. The Metropolitan Planning Organization is responsible for the review. The county commission is responsible for the final determination.

Stewart said the Florida Department of Transportation provided figures that indicated a 21 percent increase in construction costs over the past two years.

During the MPO's initial review, its technical committee had shown that an across-the-board 21 percent increase was needed to ensure that the fee program kept pace with costs.

However, in December the MPO voted 6-4 against any upping the fees due to the current economic environment and uncertainties with state property tax reform legislation.

Stewart questioned documentation that showed county staff had recommended an increase in the fees but apparently now did not support any increase.

"The county staff recommends that the impact fee not be modified, I don't believe that," Stewart said. "From the get-go, staff was very supportive of following the formula (of increasing fees to cover increasing costs)."

Brian Smith, executive director of the county's Planning Department, told Stewart that staff had initially supported an increase.

"At first we supported an increase of 21 percent," Smith said. "But since have changed our mind due to current construction."

In other business:

- The board postponed scheduling of a public hearing on a proposed amendment to the county's human rights ordinance due to a claim that portions of it could be found unconstitutional.

Commissioner Calvin Harris voted against the motion to defer, saying any possible legal problems could be discussed at a public hearing.

- A proposed ordinance amending the county's code relating to the Tourist Development Council and special events marketing, as well as approval of a name change from new product marketing grants to special event marketing grants and grant guidelines was approved 6-1. Commissioner Ken Welch voted no.

Welch was concerned that changes to the grant guidelines were too restrictive, especially those that restrict spending of grant money to marketing only.

"Enabling events is just as important," he said.

Dennis Long with the county attorney's office said state law restricts how bed tax funds are spent and that the new funding guidelines comply with the law.

- Commissioners took another step toward development of the Toytown property in St. Petersburg. Mike Meidel, director of Economic Development, was given the go-ahead to begin more serious negotiations with Industrial Realty-Bear Creek Capital Development Partners. The plan is to place shops, hotels, homes, parks and trails on the site of the former landfill.

The next regular meeting of the board of county commissioners is scheduled on Tuesday, Feb. 5, 9:30 a.m., in the commissioner chamber in the Pinellas County Courthouse, 315 Court St., Clearwater.

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