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Pro business county

Actions on planning office, impact fees positive

From promoting public-private partnerships to fast-tracking the permitting program, Manatee County government continues to pursue economic development.

Thursday's commission meeting put two other strategic ideas in the spotlight.

A new plan on planning

Entrenched bureaucrats, beware.

Department heads in Manatee County government must now see a clear trend coming from Administrator Ed Hunzeker:

Customer service is the top priority.

Overlook that mandate at your own peril.

First came the Building Department, long a bastion of the us-versus-them, the-customer's-always-wrong approach to service. Permit delays frustrated contractors and builders to no end. In came new management, a new mission and a new attitude — to applause.

Now comes the Planning Department. Here, too, contractors and builders have long complained about delays getting plans approved. So out with the old leadership and in with the new.

Hunzeker appointed John Osborne interim director, and Dave Gustafson will serve as the new community planning administrator. Osborne promises an economic development perspective as he leads a review of the county's comprehensive plan and land development codes — some of which he called "too heavy handed." He'll also look at speeding up the plan approval process.

This sound strikingly similar to what John Barnott accomplished over the past year with the Building Department — a welcome sign. For that, he was rewarded with the full title of director in mid-March.

Now Osborne faces that challenge. We wish him the same success.

The impact of impact fees

This is all part and parcel of the county's commendable focus on changing the direction of government to a more business-friendly and customer-oriented service provider.

To that end, Hunzeker offered a compromise to the development community over impact fees, those one-time charges

on construction to cover increased demands on county services and infrastructure.

While some developers and homebuilders have been clamoring for a complete moratorium, the county administrator proposed a 25 percent reduction in the portion of the impact fee that pays for transportation.

Along with the Manatee County school board opting to drop impact fees for a year (still to be approved by the county commission), the price of single-family, three-bedroom home could plunge by \$8,200.

At the lower end of the real estate market, that's a significant savings for a home buyer — one we hope builders appreciate.

As Hunzeker told the Herald's Editorial Board, a complete suspension of the fee "would really hurt us" and potentially cause some road projects to be scrapped.

Still, some county commissioners want greater consideration of a one-year moratorium to boost the construction industry, a position we continue to support.

The county's impact fee schedule on that three-bedroom home calls for \$971 to go toward county parks, \$839 to law enforcement, \$182 to public safety and \$7,013 to roads. With the education fee on hold, a complete county suspension could then potentially chop \$15,500 from the home price.

Whether or not either figure — \$8,200 or \$15,500 — will produce a major economic stimulus is open to debate, but with the collapse of the housing market can the county commission afford to sit still? If an impact fee suspension fails to stimulate job creation and home construction, then little's lost. The potential gain in the local economy is worth seeking.

Developers did tell the commission about an uptick in customer interest now, and a savings of thousands of dollars could rope in buyers.

Commission Chair Gwen Brown is taking a cautious approach, and rightly so. She wants a report on which capital improvement projects could be affected, with more discussion coming Tuesday.

Certainly, growth will not return to the boom times, and far fewer roads will be necessary. The county's timeline for road construction — at a cost of \$1.6 billion over 30 years — is now outdated. Plus, the cost of road construction has dropped dramatically. A fresh look at upcoming projects could tip the scales in the decision over fees.

Home buyers win either way, and we expect the homebuilding industry will, too.