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## **Revised impact fee proposals detailed**

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Transportation impact fees will double for new homes and rise steeply for some businesses under proposed fee revisions by Alachua County.

The new fees will be considered by the County Commission in the coming weeks.

The current general residential fee is \$1,052 per 1,000 square feet. The proposed fee is \$2,439 per 1,000 square feet. The fee will be lower for homes in a subdivision with a traditional neighborhood design but higher for those in a rural agricultural area.

Most commercial fees are now \$3,814 per 1,000 square feet, but varying fees will be charged under the proposal.

A large-scale superstore, for instance, will be charged \$29,785 per 1,000 square feet. A convenience store/gas station will pay \$25,618 per pump.

The fees are based on road-building costs, traffic generated by the development and other factors.

Builders believe the fees are the wrong approach to take, saying they penalize buyers of new homes and people opening or expanding businesses.

"Impact fees are not going to solve the infrastructure that the county has. They are taxing the wrong people and a very small number of people," said Gainesville attorney Melissa Murphy, who chairs an impact fee committee of the Builders Association of North Central Florida. "There is no clear plan to spend the money they have already collected, which is almost \$2.4 million. I think we are beyond discussing formulas. We are beyond discussing calculating impact

fees. This discussion needs to take place at a higher level on whether or not this is how the community wants to pay its bills."

Rob Brinkman, chairman of the Suwannee-St. Johns Group of the Sierra Club, countered that the fees are appropriate.

"I know that a lot of people are really shocked at the size of the fees, but in actuality they reflect the actual costs, which have sky-high-rocketed lately," Brinkman said. "If we don't charge these impact fees, we end up being obligated to build the (road) capacity, which we don't have the money to build. Then the taxpayers have to pay for it."

County impact fee administrator Jonathan Paul said the proposed fees are based on a more realistic reflection of the cost of road improvements.

Paul added the proposed fees were developed with suggestions from various interest groups including builders and environmental organizations.

"Impact fees in and of themselves are never going to pay for everything, but these are going to go a lot further toward actually getting roadway improvements done as opposed to the existing fees," Paul said. "(The current fees) were low to begin with and then they were discounted, so they were even lower."

Impact fees are a way for new growth to offset the costs it creates. The county levies separate impact fees to get money for roads, fire service and parks. However, a proposed new fire assessment will replace the fire impact fee if it is approved by the County Commission, County Manager Randall Reid said.

Impact fees and the fire assessment are primarily fees levied on unincorporated areas unless a city opts to levy them as well.

The county in February recalculated the fees to arrive at an amount that would be needed to cover more of the costs. Some of those fees were considerably higher than the new amounts being proposed. A retail superstore, for instance, previously was calculated at \$74,869 per 1,000 square feet - far higher than the newly revised \$29,785 per 1,000 square feet.

Paul said the proposed fees are lower than previously calculated because some different data was used. Murphy said the Builders Association is concerned the lower proposed fees will make it appear developers are being given a break by the county.

"I think that has done a disservice to the entire process," she said. "It has created false expectations that the impact fees should be the very high

number. That could be misconstrued as some type of concession to the development community."

Reid said impact fees are a way for counties to diversify revenue to rely less on property taxes. He believes that will become more prevalent throughout Florida if the state Legislature restricts the amount of property tax counties can collect.

"It is inevitable with what is going on in Tallahassee that counties are going to have to turn more to fees," Reid said. "There is kind of a fraud being committed by people in the state Legislature acting as if reducing revenue makes the needs go away."

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