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## Road impact fees out for some on Old 41

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The Bonita Springs City Council took less than 10 minutes Wednesday to discuss and approve an incentive plan to help small businesses jump-start the redevelopment of Old U.S. 41.

The city's plan, approved 5-0, will forgive road impact fees - fees the city charges to help pay for road improvements - for certain businesses that open or relocate to Old 41 between Dean Street and Rosemary Drive.

Rex Sims, a longtime business owner on Old 41, told the council the road through the heart of Bonita Springs is on the verge of a turnaround from where it was 20 years ago, and the city's plan could be the spark that ignites its redevelopment.

"We experienced the pain and suffering on Old 41 - and when we bought that corner, it was a brave act," said Sims, owner of Heaven Scent Flowers.

When Sims started his business at Ragsdale Street and Old 41, there were drug dealers, prostitutes and all the other elements that come with blight, he said.

Over the years, the now defunct Community Redevelopment Agency made improvements to the area and so did the city.

But more is still needed.

"We now have people coming to Old 41 for concerts, special events and some people are coming down there for the first time," Sims said. "Another big change can come now ... by working with small businesses by providing them with an incentive."

"I was prepared to vote against this until I heard Rex's comments," said councilman Pat McCourt.

The incentive plan will forgive road impact fees that can total as much as \$20,000 for a business that occupies 1,000 square feet of space. The fees are charged to owners of new buildings or when there is a change of use.

Plans for Old 41's redevelopment have been in the works for years, and the current proposal didn't receive unanimous support from City Council until Wednesday. Some council members were at odds over what types of businesses should be exempt from fees and where the boundaries of the exemption area should be drawn.

Businesses such as retail stores, hotels, offices and restaurants would get the exemption while a stand-alone bar would not, despite the fact it would attract people to the area at night.

The other issue was extending the exemption area on Old 41 from Goodwin Street north to Rosemary Drive - a move councilman John Spear was reluctant to make.

"I still would like to see this narrowed to Terry Street and Dean Street," said Spear, an attorney who didn't vote on the issue because of a conflict of interest.

He represents the property owners of Dean Street LLC and Preserve Equity LLC.

But no one agreed with him and councilwoman Janet Martin pushed for adoption of the plan extending the incentive area from Dean Street north to Rosemary Drive.

Over the years, the city has tried to do what it can to improve Old 41 by installing decorative streetlights, improving sidewalks, widening portions of the road and purchasing Imperial River Court and turning it into Riverside Park in 2004. It also bought Bamboo Mobile Village, cleared the land and hoped Imperial Landing would come to fruition.

The construction slump hit and that project has since been put on the shelf until a new developer is willing to step in.

## Additional Facts

in OTHER ACTION ...

The Bonita Springs City Council:

Agreed to join Estero officials in what may be an uphill battle to alter flight plans coming into Southwest Florida International Airport. Council members agreed to see what influence they can wield after an October decision by the Federal Aviation Administration to change flight patterns of planes coming from the Northeast. Until October, flights had been coming from the west over the Gulf of Mexico, but they are now flying directly over communities in Estero and Bonita Springs.

"We ought to support our neighbors to the north on this," said Bonita Springs councilman John Spear. "It's a very hot issue in Estero (one that tops even the Coconut Road exchange)." At last week's Estero Council of Community Leaders meeting, chairman Don Eslick said the group is working to get together a list of key contacts. Eslick estimated between 30,000 and 60,000 residents are affected by about 125 daily flights and could see as many as 220 in the future. But Bonita Springs Assistant City Manager Barbara Barnes-Buchanan said there may be little anyone can do. Barnes-Buchanan said the change in flight tracks was done "strictly for a safety issues ... that there had been some near misses over the past years" and the FAA was forced to redo its patterns from the Midwest and Northeast."

"It's a difficult situation because you're moving the tracks from one neighborhood to another," she said.

- Approved spending \$14,200 for maintenance of vehicles used by the Lee County Sheriff's Office for its enhanced enforcement services in the city.

- Vowed to get tough on unsanctioned groups collecting money at intersections in the city. The action

follows reports of an unknown group that told motorists it was collecting money for military veterans. "As far as we can tell at this point, there wasn't any veterans group doing this," said councilman Dick Ferreira. "It looks like a scam."

- Heard a presentation by Steven Slachta, chairman of the Veterans Advisory Committee, who asked the city council to consider using a city-owned property at 11071 East Terry St. as a veterans nursing home. "Our committee wants to do what's best for the city," Slachta said.

Slachta explained the committee wanted only to suggest its idea as a possible use. Councilman John Spear said the city and the council need to take a "hard look" at the property and determine a use for it soon.

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