

Road impact fee exemption extended to spur downtown Bonita Springs

By PETE BISHOP

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With redevelopment efforts finally showing signs of life in downtown Bonita Springs, City Council members on Wednesday unanimously voted to extend a road impact fee exemption for projects built in the district.

The exemption was set to end at the beginning of next year but will be extended for another two years, partly due to the bad economy.

"It was set in much better times," City Manager Carl Schwing said. "We haven't moved along as quickly as we'd like in regard to recovery."

Adopted in January 2009, it exempts the payment of road impact fees when a project is deemed to reduce blight or attract visitors, residents and businesses to the area.

The decision to extend the exemption comes as Shangri-La Healing Waters resort makes final plans for a ribbon-cutting holiday event on Dec. 21. The event will mark the first time Shangri-La has been open to the public since a series of organic food seminars was held at the resort in 2003.

The council approved a special events permit for the event at Wednesday's meeting. Reopening the historic resort has been seen as a key anchor for redevelopment efforts downtown.

Two businesses recently set up shop in the downtown redevelopment, as well. A catering company recently opened on Old 41 Road just north of West Terry Street. A half mile to the south, across from Shangri-La, a Caribbean restaurant is set to open before the end of the year.

In addition to extending the road impact fee exemption, the council agreed to lift a 5,000-square-foot size limitation on projects receiving the exemption.

City Attorney Audrey Vance said a retail business currently has tentative plans to build an 8,000-square-foot store in the district.

Schwing said most lots in the area accommodate a maximum of 13,500 feet of development space, so massive projects receiving exemptions will not be a problem.

Councilman John Spear agreed with extending the exemption, but said the city needs to do more to spur growth in the district.

"I think we need to take a good, broad, comprehensive look at what we've done downtown," Spear said. "In the last two years, only one property owner has taken advantage of what we've done. We need to get out in front of it."

At Wednesday's meeting, the council also:

Approved a request from the owners of Bonita Commons shopping center to allow two restaurants to serve alcohol outdoors.

One restaurant, Figs Grille, opened in October. The second liquor license will be reserved for future tenants.

Continued a hearing regarding the city's roadside sign ordinance. The council is considering changes to the ordinance that would prohibit sign owners from changing a sign's size when it is replaced or relocated.

Asked city staff to gather information in regard to a planned extension of Logan Boulevard from Collier County to Bonita Beach Road.

The project will impact traffic on Bonita Beach Road and possibly alleviate traffic congestion on other north-south throughways.



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