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Should SLW pay beach fees?

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Beaches and boating did not lure John Imperato to St. Lucie West five years ago.

Living at the Cascades — where virtually every home has a pool — driving 40 to 50 minutes to the ocean is just not a must-do activity.

"If I go once a year, that's about it," Imperato said, adding most of his neighbors aren't exactly beach bums either.

City planners pointed out such lack of interest this week to criticize a controversial proposal from the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council that would force western Port St. Lucie developers to pay Martin County for boat and beach facilities.

"Obviously, not every new resident in western PSL will own a boat, and some individuals will not go to the beach in either county (Martin or St. Lucie)," the planners wrote in a memo to City Manager Don Cooper. "In fact, given the prevalence of housing options closer to these facilities, it could be argued that fewer boaters will choose to reside in the western annexation area." The proposal, which was crafted by Orlando consulting firm Government Services Group, suggests western developers pay roughly \$1,000 per house to Martin County. To account for the distance, only about half of all residences would be charged.

Martin County officials have praised the plan, saying the 55,000 homes proposed for the area must pay for the burden they likely will put on county beaches. Port St. Lucie has few boat ramps and no beach access of its own.

But city officials say the proposal is researched poorly and unreasonable. The proposed fee is higher than the \$458 parks and recreation impact fee developers already must pay to the city.

City planners suggested a study of beach usage be done by monitoring vehicle license plates or surveying beach-goers. They also wanted the regional planning council to consider other payment options.

"A better solution for all parties may be to upgrade existing St. Lucie County facilities, which appear to be underutilized compared to Martin County facilities, which (have) been improved significantly in recent years," the planners wrote.

St. Lucie County completed about \$1 million in beach improvements this year. Only about \$45,000 came from fees collected in Port St. Lucie.

"Before I put Port St. Lucie's money in Martin County, I'll put it in our county where it belongs," Mayor Bob Minsky said.

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