

A Victory for Sarasota Utility Customers



In a rare victory for making growth pay its own way, the City Commission voted unanimously on February 16 to restore the water and sewer impact fee on developers.

No one spoke against the proposal at the public hearing, with only me for Control Growth Now appearing, to speak for it.

We have fought for this result for the past four years, most recently losing a 2 to 3 vote to restore the impact fee, on July 21, 2014. Then as now Commissioners Susan Chapman and Willie Shaw voted for the impact fee. On Monday night, Commissioner Suzanne Atwell switched her 2014 "no" vote to "yes". She was joined by Commissioners Liz Alpert and Shelli Freeland Eddie, who have replaced pro-developer Commissioners Paul Caragiulo (now a pro-developer County Commissioner) and Shannon Snyder.

After the vote, Commissioner Eddie urged staff to see to what extent the added revenue could allow the City Commission to roll back the series of water and sewer rate hikes the City Commission has imposed on City residents and businesses, including hikes of 6% a year in 2015 and 2016, following several annual increases of 4% in the years before that. Staff will also report back this summer on an update to the water and sewer impact fee that will likely allow the Commission to increase the fee, to take account of increased construction costs since the present fee was set in 2005.

We have strongly opposed those rate hikes in light of the suspended impact fee, and endorse the proposal to now roll them back. Most recently, at the same 2014 meeting as the impact fee was defeated, only now-Mayor Willie Shaw voted against the rate hikes.

City staff endorsed restoring the impact fee, noting that City lost about one million dollars in 2015 that the City needed for water and sewer system capacity

improvements, due to the suspension of the water and sewer impact fee. At Monday's meeting, staff reported that the City lost \$485,000 in water and sewer impact fees on just four recent developments alone.

Letting developers get a free ride while soaking City residents and businesses with rate hikes caused Paul Caragiulo to admit in 2014, while voting for the rate hikes and against the impact fee, "It does look heinous". As we have noted, Wikipedia defines "heinous" as "utterly odious or wicked" and provides as additional synonyms, "evil, atrocious, monstrous, abominable, detestable, contemptible, reprehensible, despicable, egregious, horrific, terrible, awful, abhorrent, loathsome, hideous, unspeakable and execrable."

No longer, now that the water and sewer impact fee is being restored, effective for permit applications filed on or after April 4, a rate hike rollback will be considered and the impact fee will be updated later this year.

Some times, the people win.

The next big test will be soon, when the City Commission considers whether to reverse deep cuts in another impact fee, the mobility fee to make developers pay for their impacts on needed transportation improvements (such as roads, buses, sidewalks and bike paths). On February 1, the City Commission unanimously agreed to advertise for public hearing a revision in the mobility fee to the full amount calculated by its expert consultant. Given the dollars involved, and the public's growing concern over traffic congestion, this will be even more important than restoring the water and sewer impact fee.

Stay tuned.

-- Dan Lobeck