

County Struggles to Fund Roads

Roads, From Page 1

demand was good 10 years ago, but it was a "healthy situation, not a chaotic one like it is now."

The county's budget has experienced the effect of the new construction. To meet the demand the county had to focus on new and innovative ways to meet the shortfall. One method that is controversial and not necessary innovative is to raise impact fees. The impact fees are based on the number of bedrooms added by a development project. The idea being that each bedroom represents additional population and therefore additional road usage, schooling demands, sewer and water usage, increased garbage collection and other services. But raising the impact fees is anathema to developers who say the cost will be rolled into the ever-skyrocketing price of new construction in the area. Right now the county impact fee is \$5,461 for a three-bedroom single-family detached home, totaling \$11,553.21 when you add the school fee. The county recently raised the total impact fee from \$7,832 to \$11,553.

"The biggest problem that we have is that the cost of construction increases so fast that the impact fee increase cannot keep up with it," he said. The price has skyrocketed and the county is looking for a way to meet the short-fall that impact fees and gas taxes will not cover.

Another method to raise needed road revenues would be the proposed 5-cent gasoline tax, according to Mau. The county estimated such a tax would increase \$5 million per year. This could be used for supplementing funding of new roads and reconstruction of existing roads. Mau said that the county has had to rely on innovative funding from the state and development to meet the shortfall, but there is no long-term solution.

"We will start looking at various new funding options including increased funding by developers that are not impact fee reimbursed," he said.

New construction will "add a lot of funds to the capital



The County is struggling to keep pace financially with the demands of road construction and road improvements east of the interstate I-75. Lakewood Ranch Boulevard is the site of construction as workers install sewage mains.

improvement fund because of impact fees," Mau said. However, "the impact fees only cover half of the needs and leave the county searching for new and additional funds, including 'off the top' dollars."

These are special earmarked funds from federal and state programs to be used on specific projects.

When explaining how and when a new road needs to be built, widened or expanded, Mau said every road has a capacity and that each developer must map out and reserve the amount of traffic it will add to the roads surrounding their development. Where the capacity for a road is exceeded, the developer must fix "those elements that are projected to fail," said Mau. Mau credited

Lakewood Ranch for doing more than it has to.

"SMR builds a lot of roads and they don't always take impact fee credits for it," he said. "They are independent, large and successful and have huge financial resources to do things right, and they want to do it right."

The quantity of plans to review and coordinating new construction is another challenge for Mau accompanying the rapid growth. Eighty-five thousand new homes are expected north of the Manatee River, which will double that region's population. In Mau's way of looking at things, that equals 650,000 added vehicle trips to roads that cannot meet the demand. Somehow the county has to find funds to finance the construction to handle that traffic.

For Putnal, It's a Battle of Visions

Battle, From Page 1

development. The county thinks that they are asking for more density, while they are just trying to shift it around, according to Bowles. County rules state that one can only achieve Planning Development Agriculture status as an old subdivision.

"If they would let us apply the rule to this, we would be up and running," said Putnal. The land has been in the family for four generations and Putnal is ready to develop.

"It is time to sell and develop," he said. "We are trying to tie it into affordable housing, but I don't think the county got their plan together very well." Some of the land is to valuable to leave as agriculture, and Putnal feels that it is time to cash it in. "The land is a part of the family and I like to have a hand in how it turns out," he said. "It is going to go to development, I am just trying to stay involved and make it as rural as I can."

Putnal and Bowles are trying to stay away from creating more high-priced homes. "We want to keep it cracker style," said Bowles. It will be durable houses with all the charming features of old Florida homes. "We are thinking more in terms of decreasing size and increase durability," said Bowles.

There are many high-priced homes on the market, and the county is searching for solutions to keep housing affordable for the average-paid worker. Putnal and Bowles are trying to make it a reality, but somehow the county doesn't realize that.

"We are thinking outside the box, and it is hard getting anything like that into the bureaucracy," said Putnal.

Right now they are in the pre-application process and waiting for feedback from the county. The price tag for a median-priced home in the Manatee County is about \$367,800, an increase of 34% from 2004 to 2005, according to National Association of Realtors. Putnal's development would be a mixed neighborhood priced anywhere from \$197,000, the price for workforce housing, to \$300,000.

Suzi Dobbs, affordable and workforce housing coordinator, has been very helpful, said Bowles. "She likes the idea, but doesn't now how feasible it is." She is worried about the location and the infrastructure, Bowles said.

"Whenever a house is build, the infrastructure would have to be improved," said Bowles. "We are strategically located between Manatee and Sarasota. It is not like we want to create anything in the middle of nowhere."

Affordable housing is now being aimed at the downtown area, but Bowles and Putnal believes that charming

and unique homes in a nice rural setting would attract people.

"Why don't we capture the old character homes, dish it up and put in a place that is really neat and only 12 miles from Sarasota?" said Bowles.

If the county approves the plan and the process gets fast tracked through the system, the homes could be completed by Summer 2006. However, Putnal and Bowles are realistic.

"A lot depends on what parameters the county will put up," said Bowles. "The county could be so rigorous trying to keep housing prices down and kill the whole thing. Too many restrictions and we are going to walk away from everything. The County has a tendency to be negative to something new, but if we only can get them to see what we are really trying to do."

The rapid price increases in homes in the county has created an obvious niche for more affordable development. Putnal says his 150 homes would house working class residents.

If the county is going to prevent development here to make sure to keep it agricultural "we are going to have a lot of million dollar houses, but not anyone to mow the lawn because they cannot afford to live out here," Putnal said.

Cost, From Page 1

nearly completed. It was decided in April that they would not sell to-be-built homes for the rest of GreyHawk Landing and only sell when the drywall was up.

"With the demand right now you can do that," Shinham said. "Four years ago, you couldn't. A lot of builders are doing the same thing. You have no choice. You can't continue to eat the cost increases."

"That way we know exactly what the hard costs are," Shinham said.

Not all local builders are using this same method to avoid eating the extra costs.



Mike Mervis, vice president of Towne Realty under Homes By Towne who is developing in GreyHawk Landing, says they take into account what the cost of product and the increases to determine a price for their customers before building begins.

"We're paying careful attention to increases in cost," Mervis said. "I'd want to know what my price is at the beginning."

Mervis says he believes the costs of building products will start to level off soon giving buyers a better deal. He says Homes By Towne will continue to develop homes at a steady pace in Manatee County.

It is not just builders that may be eating the rising costs of construction products. Homeowners looking

to remodel or expand may be effected by the increases.

"The Home Depot is meeting the increased demand for building material supplies in the hurricane impacted areas and is working very closely with all of its vendors to ensure that it has the products its customers need in all stores," the retail chain said in a prepared statement. "Because of our size, we are able to manage the cost of commodities. As the rebuilding increases, products such as drywall may come under pressure. Our associates are continuing to work very hard to do everything they can to help our customers with products and services."

Moylan said because the prices are going to continue to grow, builders and home remodelers may not want to wait.

"Personally I say go for it," Moylan said. "I don't see any indication that its going to go down."