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## Board shrinks building fee hikes

**It should reduce -- but not stop -- department layoffs.**

**By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer**

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El Dorado County supervisors, who last month decided to pursue layoffs in the Building Services Department rather than approve a 35 percent increase in building permit fees, backpedaled at bit last week.

Following a discussion of measures that could be taken quickly to streamline the building permit process, the Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 for more modest fee increases and to boost general fund support for Building Services.

The action is expected to reduce, but not eliminate, employee layoffs or transfers to other departments.

The supervisors also unanimously called for a long-term solution in the form of a general plan amendment that would raise the threshold for projects requiring reviews for general plan compliance. Such reviews currently are required for any project involving a structure larger than 120 square feet or requiring a grading permit.

The proposed amendment would raise the threshold to construction involving more than 20,000 square feet of soil disturbance, significantly reducing the number of projects that would have to go through the time-consuming general plan consistency review, said Greg Fuz, development services director.

At its June 19 meeting, the board approved a 6 percent increase in the building permit fee for projects, such as new commercial and home construction, that are subject to the county's traffic impact mitigation fee. The traffic impact fee, which ranges from \$13,670 to \$37,000 per single-family home, depending on location, typically is regarded by builders as the county's most onerous development-related fee.

For projects that don't require traffic impact fees -- such as swimming pools and remodels or additions to existing structures -- the building permit fee will increase 25 percent. The board also agreed to raise the minimum fee from the current \$50 to \$100.

The supervisors put the department on notice that it has six months to improve its efficiency and turnaround time for permits, or the board would consider rescinding the fee increases.

"I don't see a way out of this," said Supervisor Jack Sweeney. "We do have a monopoly, and if we cut back on these people, (the process) is going to go slower."

Building industry representatives, who have worked with Building Services staff members in recent weeks to come up with steps to improve the permitting process, said they still oppose any fee increase.

"If you raise fees, it's tantamount to cutting jobs," said Josh Wood, government affairs coordinator for the Sacramento Builders Exchange. "There's no way that raising fees is going to solve this issue."

Supervisor Ron Briggs also argued that a fee hike was not the solution.

"The root of the problem is the process," he said. "It's the general plan. ... That's why I'm saying no raise."

Board Chairwoman Helen Baumann said increasing the general fund subsidy to Building Services by nearly \$500,000, to a total of about \$1.1 million, would require cuts in other departments that rely on

general fund revenue.

Even with increases in fees and general fund revenue, Building Services faces at least a \$110,000 deficit that likely will have to be eliminated through employee layoffs or transfers. Prior to last week's action, the department planned to eliminate 15 filled positions.

Larry Lohman, county building official, said staff members and building industry representatives agreed on a number of steps that could be taken in the next few weeks.

They include updating the building plan checklist, offering "pre-submittal" meetings with applicants to identify key issues, initiating a time-tracking system for building permits and adequately staffing the permit counter so plan checkers are not forced to handle over-the-counter inquiries.

The staff also is developing a process to fast-track affordable housing projects as well as commercial and other projects that generate jobs.

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