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## Pinellas County ordinance would give it regulatory control of properties in cities

By Will Hobson, Times Staff Writer

*Pinellas wants to pay its established building fee rate on projects in cities. Largo officials oppose it.*

**LARGO** - Can Pinellas County legally give itself regulatory control of certain county properties that lie within cities?

The county thinks it can, and it is working on an ordinance that would make that power official.

Largo city management disagrees, though, and is the first of 24 cities in the county to formally contest an ordinance that could affect them all.

Largo City Manager Mac Craig sent Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala a letter Friday asking him to scrap the proposed ordinance. County officials drew up the ordinance after learning they would have to pay Largo about \$205,000 more for building permits than they would pay themselves if a new \$81 million public safety complex the county is building was in the unincorporated area.

"The City wants to avoid a dispute with the County regarding the legality of the ordinance," wrote Craig, who attached a memo from Largo City Attorney Alan Zimmet arguing that the proposed ordinance is illegal.

"The ordinance will have significant impact on the City, as well as other municipalities, and the City believes strongly that it should have the regulatory authority to enforce the building codes over county development within the City's limits," Craig wrote. "Therefore, I would urge you to reconsider your pursuit of the adoption of this ordinance."

Pinellas County wants regulatory control over properties such as county parks, courthouses, and health and welfare facilities that lie within city limits, such as the new public safety complex planned for the Sheriff's Office property in Largo. The county would pay itself about \$537,000 for permits if the complex was built outside the city but will owe Largo about \$205,000 more, Zimmet said.

County management thinks the county charter gives it the power to usurp city permitting processes.

"We have been doing this on an ad-hoc basis for years, on a case-by-case basis," said County Attorney Jim Bennett, who cited a 1999 agreement between Largo and the county. Largo agreed then to waive its permitting authority over undeveloped county property the city added through annexation.

However, that agreement covers all county properties added to Largo since 1999, while the land slated for the new public safety complex has been in Largo since 1974.

Regardless of whether the new complex is covered by the 1999 agreement, Bennett maintains that the county charter gives Pinellas the power to pass this ordinance, which would cover certain types of county properties in many cities.

Zimmet thinks the county is misinterpreting its charter.

If the county wants to take over permitting control, Zimmet says, it will need to get a countywide referendum approving such a change, then get referendum approval in each city containing a property it wants control over.

The County Commission will need to approve the ordinance at two public hearings for it to go into effect. The first hearing could be as early as the commission's Sept. 27 meeting, Bennett said.

If the County Commission passes the ordinance, Zimmet will ask Largo city commissioners whether they want to file a legal challenge.

"We'll have a discussion with the commission and see what they want to do," he said. "There are lots of options."

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