

El Mirage at last tries to set developer fees

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EL MIRAGE - Better late than never.

That's what city officials are saying as they work to establish development impact fees.

With fewer than 1,000 homes to go before the city reaches build-out, El Mirage does not expect to see a windfall from those fees.

"We're almost at build-out," City Manager B.J. Cornwall said. "Those impact fees should have been adopted (four) years ago, ahead of the growth."

Instead, it's a move that comes at the tail end of an explosion that catapulted the landlocked city from a population of 7,600 in 2000 to more than 33,000 today.

Years of such poor management have cost the city millions of dollars and left residents bearing the cost of the growth.

In recent years, El Mirage residents have seen two increases in water and sewer rates to pay for water wells and a wastewater treatment plant.

They also are paying property taxes to cover street improvements and build a City Hall.

With more of their taxes and city money covering basic services, residents have fewer amenities, such as parks and recreational programs.

Cornwall said El Mirage hopes to collect an impact fee of about \$5,300 for a home with a 3/4-inch water meter. The City Council is expected to decide on those fees at 6 p.m. March 10 in a meeting at El Mirage Elementary, 13500 N. El Mirage Road.

In the past, the city collected only what it could negotiate out of developers. Getting a set impact fee written into law is a move to correct what officials concede was a costly mistake. Millions of dollars slipped through the cracks, with the city collecting at times only a few hundred dollars per home in informal fees.

"I know we're fighting very hard," Mayor Fred Waterman said. "I honestly believe there is a light at the end of the tunnel and that it's not a train."

He added that "nothing will make up for what has happened" and can't even guess how or why this occurred.

"There are some questions that people ask me and I just can't come up with a reason," Waterman said. "I'm not sure how many administrations this goes back."

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