



Print Page

City ponders impact fees

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Study recommends Sandpoint assess fee on contractors

SANDPOINT -- Claiming Sandpoint is facing a potential population build-up that could swell to almost 40,000 residents, a California land-use planning firm received unanimous consent to conduct an impact fee study to determine whether contractors should pay fees to help accommodate future growth.

That's the most sensible way, said Bill Hofman of Hofman Planning Associates, for an emerging city like Sandpoint already taking off on growth spurt to plan for implementing infrastructure for its future.

"As planners, we see this as something very important to plan for in your city's future," Hofman told the Sandpoint Development Impact Fee Advisory Committee on Tuesday.

Hired by the city, Hofman's initial draft recommends development impact fees that would apply to builders constructing new homes in the city and those annexed into the city limits when building permits are pulled.

The fees -- which would be earmarked toward parks, roads, police and fire departments to help handle the impacts to developing infrastructure -- could be used to acquire land and to pay for facilities, but cannot be used for schools, salaries or other operating costs.

Hofman also sees a need for three fire departments that would include a combination of satellite and fully-staffed facilities -- especially one near the Sandpoint Airport -- to offset the life-threatening delays past what he calls "the choke-point of downtown."

"With the way the city is growing, it seems silly for us not to go forward and let them draw up an impact fee plan," said planning commission chairman and advisory committee member John O'Hara.

Hofman is no stranger to working with cities starting to flex their muscles under the weight of growing populations. He has advised governmental entities in Idaho, California and Utah how to implement impact fees ordinances, has written capital improvement plans as part of the process and helped Coeur d'Alene, Hayden and Rexburg implement impact fee ordinances.

His recently-completed survey of Sandpoint for projections and assumptions on land use for future growth covered every parcel in the city to the existing area of impact line. He expects to complete his impact fee study in a month, pinpointing what fees and amounts should be charged based on the city's needs.

"You need to determine what is the existing level of service and how to pay for those deficiencies," explained Hofman. "It's a way to help plan for your city's future growth."

Using the city's comprehensive plan, Hofman projected how the future of the city's "build-out" will occur through a growth-density pattern. He envisions 3.7 residential homes per acre in the area west of the railroad tracks and adjacent areas he foresees will most likely be annexed.

"That significant increase will create the need for more facilities here," he said.

But it's his proposal for three fire departments -- which he acknowledged may not happen for several years -- was lauded by

Fire Chief Robert Tyler for an attempt to create better response time, especially by having one near the airport.

"The Federal Aviation Administration specifies fire departments must respond to the center of a tarmac in four minutes," said Tyler. "On a good day, can we make it? Sure. But because of the railroad, some days we have to sit and wait. This would change the dynamics of response time.

"It's going to take creating infrastructure to help our response time a lot."