

Smart Steps

Iberia Parish forges ahead with impact fees and smart growth.

By Mary Tutwiler | 7/4/2007

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While Lafayette Parish continues to debate the merits of impact fees in order to fund infrastructure for new development, the Iberia Parish Sewerage District Board isn't waiting around. The parish had no money for capital improvements to increase capacity in its existing sewer lines, making it impossible for new developments to be approved. With approximately 900 residential and commercial lots in three subdivisions awaiting preliminary approval of the Iberia Parish Regional Planning Commission, the SDB quietly passed a \$750 per residence or commercial building sewer impact fee which will affect all new development in the rural parts of the parish.

The developers, Kirk Seiber and Troy Comeaux of Timberstone Estates, and Lorna Bourg, executive director of Southern Mutual Help Association, pushed for a solution to the inadvertent moratorium, which has discouraged development in the parish since the 1990s. The answer was a "sewer tie-in" or impact fee, something Lafayette developers have been resisting since the idea arose out of a trip members of the Lafayette Planning Commission took to Lincoln, Neb. last November. While the \$750 cap is higher than the Iberia Parish developers wanted, it does free them to move forward once the parish approves their site plans. The funds, which will be paid up front to the Iberia Parish Sewerage District No. 1, are dedicated for capital improvement and expansion of the system, and can also be used as a local match for state funds, greatly increasing the parish's likelihood of receiving state and federal grants.

Iberia Parish's Sewerage Board was created under the authority of the state constitution and instituted by the Iberia Parish Police Jury in the mid-1970s. The board has five appointed members, an executive director and a single minded mission to oversee the sewerage needs of the rural parts of the parish. The board has the authority to incur debt, issue bonds, and pass ordinances. Lafayette City-Parish Consolidated Government has no such board; all ordinances must be passed by the council. Thus the process of levying an impact fee for sewerage has to negotiate the minefield of politics, where a lot of good ideas die torturous deaths.

SMHA's proposal to build Teche Ridge, a traditional neighborhood development, has also pushed the Iberia Parish Regional Planning Commission to ask for a smart growth ordinance. Nearly 10 years ago when it was proposed, Lafayette flagship TND River Ranch required more than 100 variances to the conventional subdivision ordinance that governs new development. The Iberia Parish Regional Planning Commission wanted to avoid taking that route. Two weeks ago, the Iberia Parish Council contracted David Moore, an engineer with Freyou, Moore and Associates to draw up the new zoning ordinance, which is on schedule to be brought up for review in two to three months. Currently, Moore is reviewing codes from other communities such as east Baton Rouge and Thibodaux, to see what will fit best in Iberia Parish.

The TND ordinance will address elements such as street width, open space, lot size, setbacks, alley dimensions and possibly amenities such as sidewalks and street trees. Once adopted, the parish will have two parallel ordinances, a conventional subdivision ordinance and the new TND ordinance. Developers will have the option to choose one or the other, but not combine elements from each one.

Lafayette Planning, Zoning and Codes Director Eleanor Bouy says that a TND code is on her wish list. While she has been working closely with River Ranch architect Steve Oubre, writing the code is time consuming and expensive. "A smart growth ordinance can be a page or an encyclopedia," she says. The zoning ordinance adopted by Youngsville to accommodate its new TND, Sugar Mill Pond, was written by Bouy's office. "That is a zoning district with smart growth planning," she says. For the city of Lafayette, Bouy wants something more detailed and ambitious. However, every time she turns her attention to the code, she says the council sends her a new ordinance to write, which preempts her work on the smart code. And there is no pressure to create the ordinance at the moment. "There's no TND on line in Lafayette right now," Bouy says.

In Iberia Parish, Bourg's Teche Ridge is a train about to leave the station, and parish planners reacted to the immediate need for a smart growth policy. "I think it's a wise step, that shows excellent leadership in the parish," says Bourg. "I think Iberia Parish is ahead of the rest."

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