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Traffic impact fee draws ire

Additional burden from plan unfair, developers say

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Bakersfield is almost \$1 billion short of what it needs to complete its planned highways, and not many options for making up the money. So City Manager Alan Tandy Thursday proposed a fee on most new development -- \$2,865 per home, on top of the existing \$6,800 traffic impact fees.

The fee has been in the works since Tandy proposed it this past spring. But it wasn't until Thursday, at a City Council committee meeting, that the city had a hard number.

The plan was immediately criticized by developers, both for being too much burden and for not raising enough money.

But in the absence of a better idea, Tandy said, it's all the city has.

The numbers

The math is simple. The city has \$623 million in federal money and local matching funds, but needs \$928 million more to complete all its highway projects. They include three planned beltways, improvements to Highway 178 and Rosedale Highway, and the Westside Parkway extension to Stockdale.

The city looked at the likely development within two miles of all those highways -- almost the entire city, except the already developed city center -- and counted 259,000 future homes and 442 million square feet of future commercial space.

Dividing the needed money by the development resulted in the fees: \$2,865 per home, 42 cents per square foot of commercial space.

But the city has only grown an average 3,000 homes a year so the money wouldn't come in fast enough, said Donna Carpenter, who runs a civil engineering firm.

"That makes this a 90-year project," she said.

And development consultant Roger McIntosh said the proposed fees put the burden of fixing Bakersfield's traffic mess on the new homeowners without a good reason. Impact fees are supposed to pay for real impacts, not just the money the city needs, he said.

"This is just an arbitrary condition," he said.

Under Tandy's proposal, the city would issue bonds to get the money then pay off the debt through the fees.

The fee would drop if the city came up with another funding source. The one mentioned most often is a half-cent sales tax increase for transportation -- which failed to get the needed two-

thirds voter approval last November. Funds from the state also would help.

Councilmen shocked

The scope of the deficit shocked the three city councilmen who were presented the numbers Thursday.

"We're short just under a billion dollars. That's today's dollars. In 10 years that's \$2 billion," said Councilman Harold Hansen.

Councilman Ken Weir said he would prefer to see the fee levied on all development in the city, not just within the two-mile zones.

"I can't imagine you're going to live anywhere in Bakersfield and not benefit from this," he said.

Public Works Director Raul Rojas said the plan includes expanding the fee. The Tandy plan would be an interim step applying the fee to nine proposed developments expected to go to the City Council on Aug. 15.

Tandy said the developers would have a choice -- accept the fee or ask the council to hold off on their projects for three months and see if the fee drops.

But Cassie Daniel of the Home Builders Association of Kern County said it feels like developers are being threatened with a total stoppage of development.

Tandy already made one concession to developers. The fee would be collected when the building permit is issued, as other fees are. Tandy had wanted the fee collected earlier, but developers protested that it would make their financing difficult.

Councilman Zack Scrivner suggested city staff consider a tiered impact fee, which would be higher for development farther from the city center, because development out there has a greater impact.

The committee is scheduled to meet again Wednesday to discuss the issue more before making a recommendation to the full City Council.

In other action, the committee:

* Endorsed a staff proposal to limit electronic message signs to very large retail centers. The committee will take up the issue again Sept. 6.

* Told car dealers that the city is not willing to let them have all the streamers, banners and signs they want, but is willing to allow the signs to be in place 60 days a year, instead of the current limit of 45 days.

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